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BRITISH PARATROOPS in action

Combat Troops Number 9

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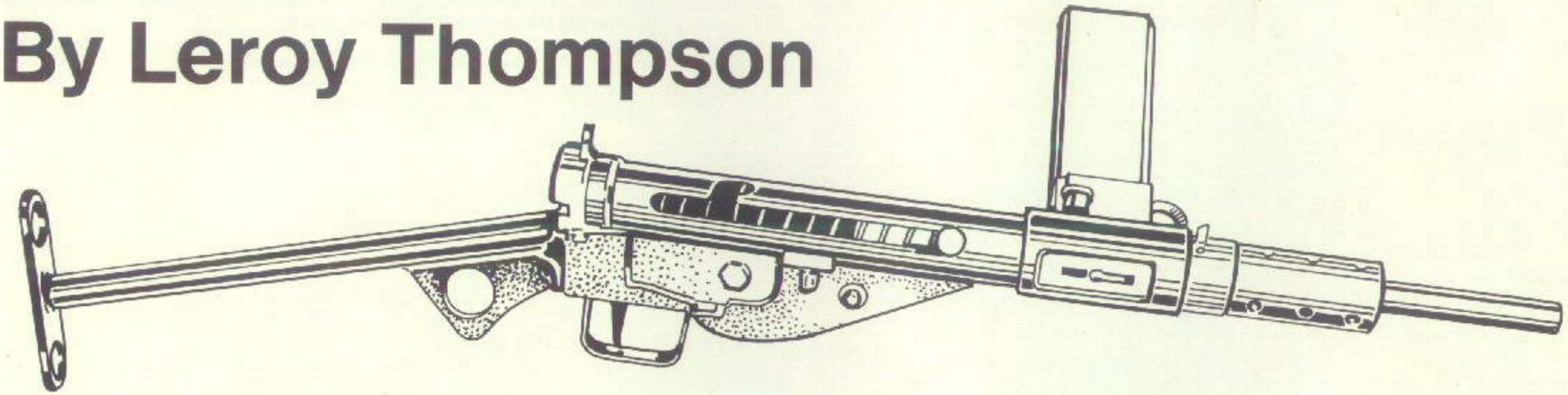
By Leroy Thompson



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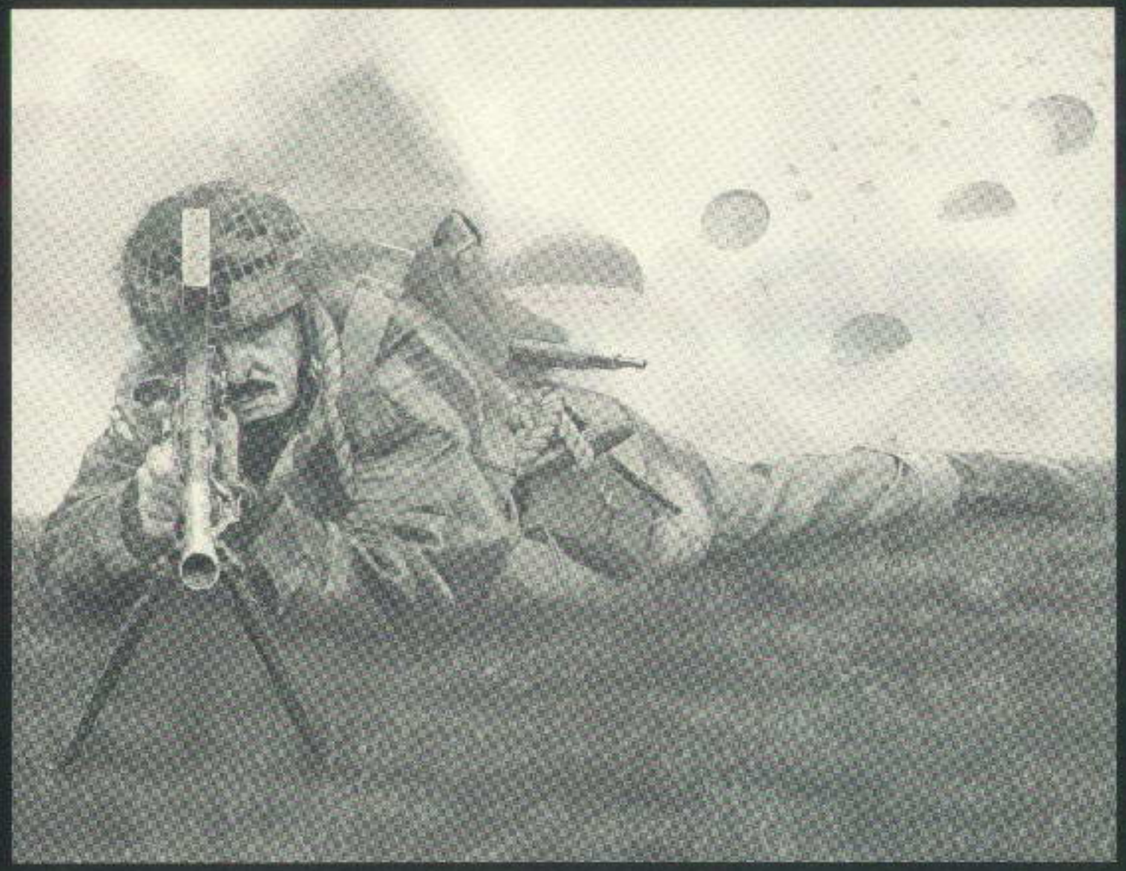

A Bren gunner, wearing the airborne helmet and Denison smock, provides drop zone security for other paratroops landing on the outskirts of Arnhem during Operation MARKET GARDEN, 17 September 1944.

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This British recruiting poster was used during 1942 to attract recruits for the Airborne Forces. The poster used a combination of an action-oriented painting with the promise of additional pay to appeal to prospective applicants.

THE AIRBORNE FORCES OF THE BRITISH ARMY CONSIST OF PARACHUTE TROOPS AND GLIDER-BORNE TROOPS OF ALL ARMS OF THE SERVICE.

Officers and men in any Regiment or Corps (except R.A.C.), who are medically fit, may apply for transfer to a parachute or glider-borne unit of the Airborne Forces. Additional pay is granted to all airborne personnel at the rate of 2- per day for parachute troops, and 1- per day for glider-borne troops. A limited number of officers and other ranks are urgently required for training as glider pilots. Application for transfer or further information should be made to unit headquarters. Condition of service are laid down in the following A.C.Is. — 1677 of 1941, 275 & 1490 of 1942.

Parachute Commandos

The Russians, Italians and Germans had experimented with parachute troops long before the British gave serious consideration to the formation of parachute units. The British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, was always interested in new techniques, especially those that would instill an aggressive spirit and take the war to the enemy. During June of 1940, he suggested that a corps of at least 5,000 parachute troops be formed to carry out commando style raids against the enemy. Initially, the concept was opposed by the Royal Air Force, which feared that such a force would put a drain on its severely limited resources of transport aircraft. The Prime Minister, however, was hard to buck and the RAF finally agreed to the establishment of a joint Army/RAF parachute training facility, to be known as the Central Landing School, at RAF Ringway.

Initially, the men of #2 Commando, which had been formed during the Summer of 1940 from recruits interested in parachuting, were assigned to undergo parachute training. These men had gone through the same interview and selection process as had other Commandos, with about seventy-five percent being rejected for various reasons. Those who were selected for Commando training were also asked if they preferred airborne or seaborne services, and those selecting the airborne service were assigned to #2 Commando.

To provide the force with the necessary transport assets, the RAF committed to assigning sufficient numbers of Whitley bombers to drop a force of 720 men plus their arms and equipment. In actuality, however, only four aircraft were initially assigned and the remainder were slow in coming. During this early stage, it was also decided to include glider training for some of the troops, with this training also conducted at the Central Landing School.

On 9 July 1940, the first contingent of trainees, made up of B and C Troops of #2 Commando, began their ground training. Their instructors included members of the RAF drawn from the training cadre at RAF Henlow where pilots and aircrews received parachute training, and Army Physical Training Corps instructors. Pilot Officer Louis Strange was in charge of the RAF instructors at the parachute school. Later, a number of professional exhibition parachute jumpers joined the RAF and were assigned as Parachute Jumping Instructors (PJIs) at Ringway.

A few days after ground training began, the instructors began test jumps from the Whitley to establish proper jump techniques for the aircraft. The technique worked out was for the jumper to exit the aircraft from a platform fitted in place of the bomber's rear turret. This method was found to be both slow and rather frightening for a new trainee, since the parachute was deployed while the men stood on the platform and they were rather forceably pulled off their perch. Later, a circular exit hatch was cut in the floor of the Whitley to allow for a more rapid exit using a static line.

To allow the fledgling parachute troops to use a static line, the 28 foot diameter Irvin parachute used by RAF pilots was altered to incorporate a 12 foot 6 inch static line.

During the first two months at the Central Landing School about 350 troops graduated, although over fifty trainees had been lost in training from injuries, deaths, or by failing to jump. Although the deaths were regrettable, they were unavoidable in the rush to train parachute troops with untried techniques and equipment. Each death was studied to find out what had gone wrong, and improvements in equipment and/or techniques were made to avoid a repetition of the accident.

To support the men once they were on the ground, a method of landing heavy weapons and equipment was needed and, to this end, 400 Hotspur gliders were ordered. In September of 1940, the Central Landing School was renamed becoming the Central Landing Establishment, under the command of Group Captain L.G. Harvey, with LTC J.F. Rock as the senior Army officer. The Central Landing Establishment was organized into a Parachute Squadron, a Glider Squadron and a Technical Development Unit. LTC Rock worked on developing special uniforms and equipment for the paratroops, including bulky, heavily padded clothing patterned after the uniforms worn by the German *Fallschirmjaeger*. This clothing later evolved into the jump smock which became a hallmark of the British paratrooper.

After completing their initial parachute training, the members of #2 Commando were assigned to the Commando course at Achnicarry to complete their training as Commandos.

On 21 November 1940, the Parachute and Glider Squadrons were re-designated #11 Special Air Service Battalion (this unit designation should not be confused with the Special Air Service formed in the Western Desert by David Sterling). As 1940 came to an end, about 2,000 jumps had been made by the men of #11 SAS Battalion in preparation for their first operational deployment.

This member of the 6th Royal Welch Parachute Battalion wears the regulation cloth covered rubber training helmet used by trainees at Ringway. He has written a message to his instructors on it in Black.

Training

Since the men of #2 Commando were the first parachute troops trained, the training syllabus of the basic parachute course evolved with them. Initially, six jumps were required to qualify for parachute wings; however, this was later increased to eight to ten jumps. Much of the initial ground training, invaluable as it was, was included because of a lack of sufficient numbers of available training aircraft. As a result, various training devices to simulate a parachute jump were designed, some more successful than others. Among the training aids at Ringway was the "Gallows," which consisted of a harness attached to a weight to simulate the shock of the parachute opening. The use of the "Gallows" resulted in so many sprains, twists, dislocations, and other injuries, that its use was eventually abandoned.

Wing Commander J.C. Kilkenny, who had been Chief Instructor at the RAF Parachute Training School, is credited with developing the final training program which would continue with little change throughout the remainder of the war. Kilkenny continued the use of ground training for physical fitness and to teach basic skills. Two hangars were converted for this portion of the course; one contained the fuselages of different types of troop transport aircraft and door mockups which were used to teach proper exit techniques for various aircraft types. The second hangar contained various training devices, including the one known as the "Fan," which allowed a trainee to make a controlled descent from a twenty-five foot platform by blowing a constant stream of air into the deployed parachute canopy.

During training, the fledgling airborne troops were broken into groups, known as sticks, of ten men under a Sergeant instructor. The course normally lasted two to three weeks, with approximately forty trained paratroops graduating each week. This number would increase dramatically as first an airborne brigade and then an airborne division were created.

The lack of training aircraft was at least partially overcome through the use of captive balloons. The first balloon experiments were carried out by instructors in November of 1940, and by April of 1941, the balloons had been installed at the facility for use during the training course. With the balloons, the course evolved further, with a trainee's first two training jumps being made from the balloons. The balloon was found to be very useful for these early jumps because the lack of a slipstream cut the number of oscillations of the parachute and made the trainee's first landings a bit softer.

Although American airborne training has normally included the toughening and weeding out process as part of parachute training, the British system differed in having the recruits already put through a physical toughening course at the Airborne Forces Depot before reporting for parachute training. This was the predecessor to today's "P Company," attended by members of the Parachute Regiment before they report for the parachute course. The earliest trainees, of course, were graduates of the Commando course and were in excellent physical condition.

Although there were slight changes during the war years, the basic parachute training course became fairly standardized. Ground training consisted of a five day course including exit training, control of the parachute, landing techniques, parachute usage, physical training, and observations of advanced students making their parachute jumps. This was followed by the parachute training course which included; two day balloon descents, one night balloon descent, and five day aircraft descents. Advanced training included; aircraft drill, use of the kitbag, lifebelt, equipment container, fitting of parachutes, and dragging. Physical training was not neglected with obstacle course runs, route marches, and weapons drills. From this course graduated the airborne troops who would make history at Normandy, Arnhem, and the Rhine.

As classmates watch, an RAF Parachute Jumping Instructor (PJI) instructs recruits at Ringway in the proper method of doing a Parachute Landing Fall (PLF).

A paratroop trainee performs a training drop in the hangar at Ringway. During this particular drop, he is practicing the proper method for shielding his face if his parachute drifts into the trees.

(Above) An RAF Parachute Jumping Instructor instructs a trainee in proper positioning his feet and knees during a drop by the use of a training swing. The PJI wears the PJI identification badge on his upper right shirt sleeve.

(Above) One of the training aids at Ringway was a trapeze device which allowed trainees to experience and learn to control the oscillations that could occur during a parachute jump. The trapeze was used to teach proper body control during such oscillations.

(Right) Wearing dummy parachute packs, a group of trainees practice the correct manner of boarding a Whitley bomber, by using a Whitley fuselage mock-up.

(Above) Another ground training device was the training tower, which released the trainee below a fully deployed parachute. The descent from the tower was usually slow and free of oscillation.

(Above) This PJI is instructing paratroop trainees in the proper method of exiting a Whitley bomber by use of a training mock-up. The Whitley was modified with a circular hatch cut in the floor for dropping paratroops.

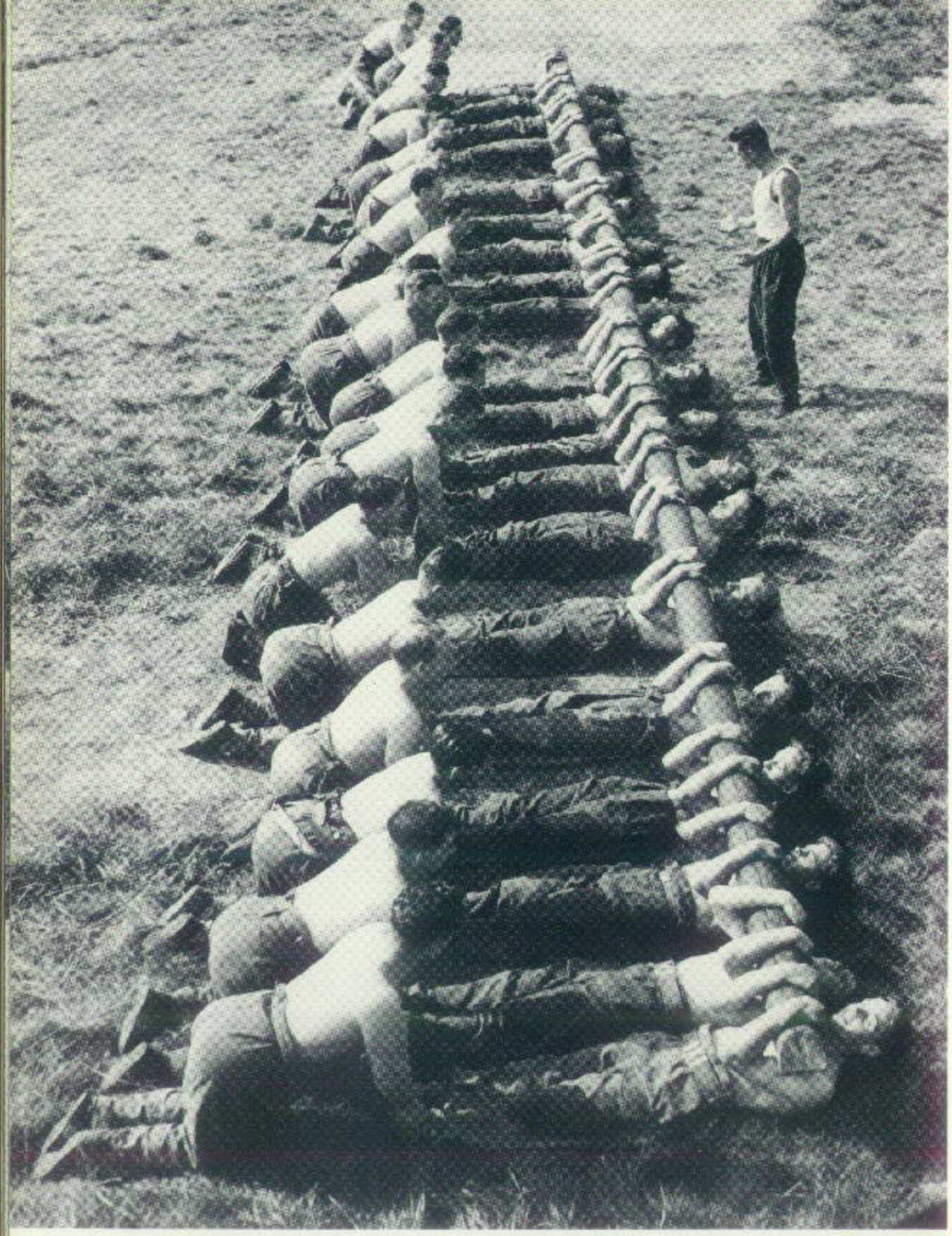
(Left) His Highness, the Maharajah Jam Saheb of Nawanagar talks with a trainee who has just completed a training jump from the parachute tower. The rigid framework within the parachute kept the chute fully deployed during the descent.

(Above) Four recruits accompanied by their instructor prepare to ascend in a training balloon for their first static balloon jump. Trainees made a total of three balloon jumps, two day and one at night.

(Left) The static balloons from which the parachute trainees made their first jumps were modified barrage balloons, with the training basket securely tethered beneath the balloon.

(Above) While their classmates push the Whitley exit mockup back and forth over the mattresses, trainees practice the proper way of exiting through the Whitley's hatch.

(Right) Recruits made their first actual parachute jump from the static balloon. The balloon basket had a circular exit through which the recruit dropped using a static line attached to the balloon basket. Each recruit was observed and assisted by an RAF PJI.



(Above) Physical training of paratroop trainees was hard. The log exercise not only toughened the troops, it taught team work as well and would become a long-standing tradition with British Airborne troops.

(Above) Women parachute riggers pack training parachutes in Ringway's parachute packing shed. The warning sign above their heads was a pointed reminder of the importance of their jobs.

Parachute Qualification Wings

Operation COLOSSUS

As the training of the first British airborne forces continued, British military officials felt that a raid was needed to test the effectiveness of these new troops. After a successful demonstration jump on Salisbury Plain by members of #2 Commando performed in front of a number of high ranking officers of the General Staff, it was decided to authorize the use of a small number of parachutists for a raid against a target in occupied Europe. Since this raid would most likely be done at night, the paratroops began practicing night jumps, while planning for the raid got underway.

By late 1940, the General Staff had selected Italy to be the target country for the raid, since it was considered a softer objective than Germany or German-occupied territory. The actual target was selected both because of its military value and as a political demonstration of Italy's vulnerability to attack. The target was the Tragino Aquaduct which carried water to Brindisi, Beri, and Foggia. The aquaduct had been built by a British firm, so there was ample information available about its construction and weak points. Another factor was that it was a difficult target to destroy by bombing because it ran through mountain passes and valleys.

By early January of 1941, the parachutists — all volunteers —had been selected for the raid. In fact, every member of the #2 Commando had volunteered, although only thirty-one were selected. The unit was commanded by MAJ T.A.G. Pritchard, second in command of #2 Commando. Drawn from the various troops of #2 Commando, the volunteers were designated as X Troop. Once selected, they were kept incommunicado at Ringway where they continued intensive training. Although they were not told their objective, a mockup of the aquaduct was built for them to study.

Even though various escape aids were sewn into their tunics, the mission was thought by many to be a suicide mission. To allow the troops at least a chance of making it back to England, a rendezvous with a submarine was arranged at a point on the Italian coast some sixty miles from the objective.

On 10 February 1941, the raid was launched. Eight aircraft were assigned to the raiders, who had been augmented by two Italian-speaking volunteers. Six aircraft carried parachutists while two bombers accompanied the formation to carry out a diversionary bombing raid on the railyards at Foggia. The stick of parachutists in each aircraft was commanded by one of the six officers assigned to the mission. Each paratrooper carried a pistol (Webley revolvers for the officers and Colt .32 caliber automatic pistols for other ranks), a Commando knife and grenades. Their other weapons (Thompson SMGs, Bren light machine guns, and explosives) were carried in containers slung under the wings of the aircraft.

One of the sticks of paratroops was commanded by LT Anthony Deane-Drummond, who was later to become one of Britain's most famous paratroops. Another stick was commanded by the Chief Engineering Officer, who would be dropped in the wrong valley and end up playing no part in the raid. The first group to land was Deane-Drummond's, and they immediately recovered their weapons and set out for the aquaduct. As other sticks landed, they gathered their weapons and explosives, although some of the aircraft had experienced problems with the container release mechanisms and the containers had not been dropped.

Encountering no opposition, the paratroops quickly secured the aquaduct. The loss of the missing containers caused a shortage of explosives; however, enough explosives were recovered to blow one pier. The junior engineering officer, LT Paterson, managed to bring down half the aquaduct by carefully placing his charges where they would do the most damage. The twenty-nine raiders who attacked the aquaduct then broke up into three groups to make their escape. The party that had been dropped off course heard the explosions and also began to make their way towards the coast.

The Italians launched an intensive search, and within a few days had captured all four parties. The raiders were threatened with being shot, but with the exception of one Italian who had jumped with them, they were treated as prisoners of war. LT Deane-Drummond escaped but was re-captured; he eventually escaped again and made it back to rejoin the parachute forces. Some of the other ranks also managed to escape and rejoin British units after the Allied landings in Italy. Other members of the raiding force escaped and joined with Italian partisans. LT Paterson, the junior engineering officer, was one of these and became well known among the partisans.

The raid had proven the viability of parachute troops by showing that they could strike important objectives deep in enemy territory. Italian morale had also suffered as a result of the raid, and both the Italians and Germans were forced to tie down troops on garrison duty to guard against possible future attacks. More importantly, however, was the fact that the raid's success prompted the Army to begin training paratroops in even larger numbers, laying the groundwork for the future airborne divisions which would jump over occupied Europe.

Bren Gun

Thompson Submachine Gun Model 1928 A1

Force Expansion

In September of 1940, an order was placed by the Ministry of Aircraft Production with General Aircraft Ltd for 400 Hotspur gliders. The Hotspur was intended to serve primarily as a support aircraft, moving supplies and large weapons such as anti-tank guns and howitzers into battle without having to break the equipment down for parachute drop. The Hotspur could carry six fully equipped troops and had a crew of two.

The Hotspur was followed by the Airspeed Horsa, a larger troop/freight glider with a capacity for twenty-five troops (although most missions were flown with fifteen troops and freight). The Horsa became the main glider used by the airborne forces and was improved throughout the war. The Mk II was equipped with a hinged nose to ease loading/unloading of equipment and vehicles.

The largest glider used by the Airborne Forces was the General Aircraft Hamilcar. This was designed to be able to lift a light tank or two Bren carriers; although, it was used mainly as a large resupply glider on most operations. The large size of the Hamilcar required the use of four engine tow aircraft such as the Halifax or Stirling.

With gliders to carry them, the first air landing troops could be formed to compliment the paratroops, and, in October of 1941, the 31st Independent Brigade Group, which had already received specialized training in mountain warfare, was re-designated as the 1st Air Landing Brigade, Britain's first glider-borne infantry. By 1942, training had been

(Below) A member of visiting Indian royalty talks to the pilot of a Hotspur glider wearing the early version of the Glider Pilot's helmet. The Brigadier in the foreground wears one of the variations of the airborne insignia, a straight *AIRBORNE* tab worn below the Pegasus patch.

(Above) The interior of a Hotspur glider was cramped, with the troops seated on bench seats along the starboard side of the fuselage. The Hotspur could carry eight fully equipped troops; however, it was solely used in the training role.

accelerated and full battalions of glider infantry were being formed. These troops, like the paratroops, were considered as elite light infantry units and were trained to a high degree.

To fly the gliders, large numbers of glider pilots were needed and in December of 1941, the Glider Pilot Regiment was formed. Since these pilots would have to fight alongside the infantry until relieved, the founders of the regiment insisted that glider pilots also be qualified infantry soldiers able to handle a Bren gun, rifle, or anti-tank gun once they had safely landed their gliders.

Initially, the Whitley bomber served as the primary tow aircraft for the glider force. As loads became heavier and the gliders became larger, the Albemarle, Halifax, Stirling, and Dakota (C-47) were all used to tow the gliders. An important step for the future of the airborne forces took place in February of 1942, when No 38 Wing of the RAF was formed. This unit was specifically tasked to provide aircraft for the airborne troops. To keep their navigational skills at the high level needed for proper troop delivery, No 38 Wing also flew precision bombing missions against likely airborne targets such as bridges and powerplants. The unit also was tasked with delivering personnel and supplies to the resistance forces in occupied Europe.

As training progressed at Ringway and sufficient numbers of trained men became available, the 1st Parachute Brigade was formed in September of 1941 under LTC Richard N. Gale (later Brigadier). Also in September, the 11th SAS Battalion was redesignated as the 1st Parachute Battalion. While the training establishment at Ringway geared up to train the numbers of parachutists to meet the needs of these new formations, the 1st Airborne Division under MGEN F.A.M. Browning began to take shape during 1942, with the Airborne Forces Depot being established at Hardwick Hall during April of 1942.

To help meet the growing manpower needs of the airborne forces, infantry battalions from selected line regiments were sent through the parachute selection course as units. The first two such battalions, the 7th Battalion, Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders and the 10th Battalion, Royal Welch Fusiliers were trained and reformed as the 5th (Scottish) and 6th (Welch) Parachute Battalions. Along with the 4th (Wessex) Parachute Battalion, these units were formed into the 2nd Parachute Brigade under the command of Brigadier Eric Down in July of 1942. Normal complement of a parachute battalion was between 600 and 800 men, while glider battalions were comprised of 976 men. With three battalions assigned, the Brigade had a strength of between 1,800 and 2,400 men.

To give these new parachute troops a sense of eliteness and pride, Browning helped gain authorization, during 1942, for distinctive uniform items to identify the trooper. The maroon beret and the Bellerophon-on-Pegasus shoulder sleeve insignia were authorized for the Parachute troops who, in August of 1942, officially became the Parachute Regiment.

(Above) The Horsa glider could carry vehicles as well as troops and cargo. These airborne troops move out after landing, in a jeep towing a cargo trailer, accompanied by a trooper on a light weight motorcycle.

(Right) Field Marshal Montgomery observes the unloading of a Mark VII Tetrarch Light Tank from a Hamilcar glider. The eight ton tank carried a 2 pounder main gun and a 7.92MM Besa coaxial machine gun. Hamilcars could carry one tank or two Bren gun carriers.

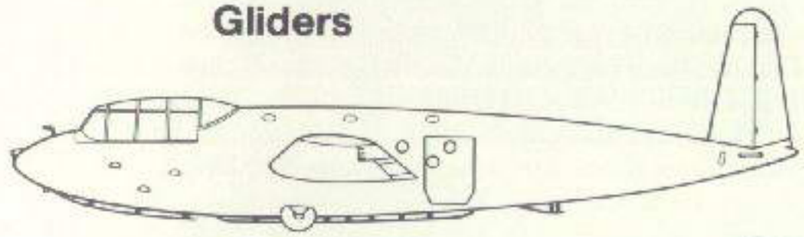
His Royal Highness, The King, inspects airborne troops during May of 1942. These troops wear the Pegasus insignia on their left shoulder and are equipped with the early version of the 1941 steel parachutist's helmet, which has a rubber rim beneath the netting.

Glider Pilot Regiment Tab

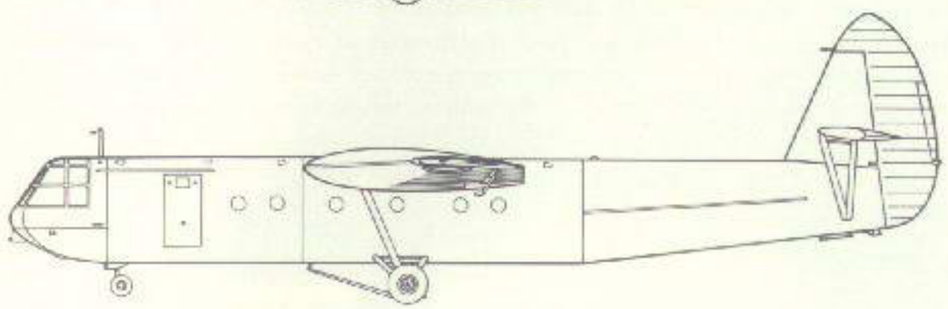
Jeeps were used for a variety of missions including reconnaissance, cargo hauling, and as tow vehicles. This anti-tank gun crew uses a jeep to tow their 6-pounder AT gun away from the landing zone. The aircraft in the background are Horsa gliders

Gliders

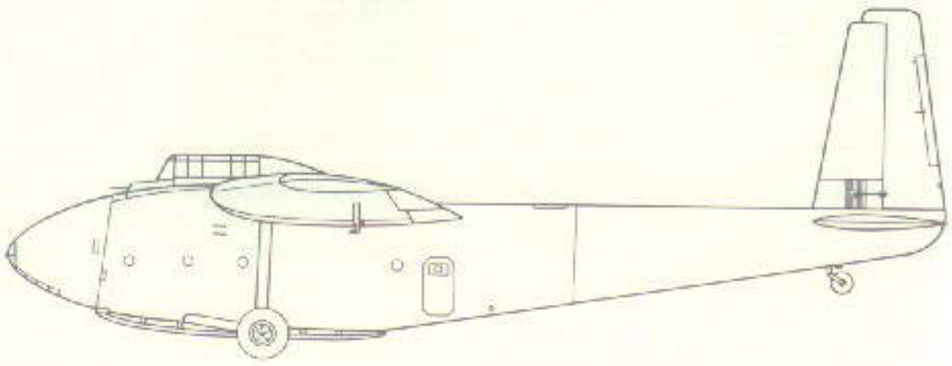
Hotspur



Horsa

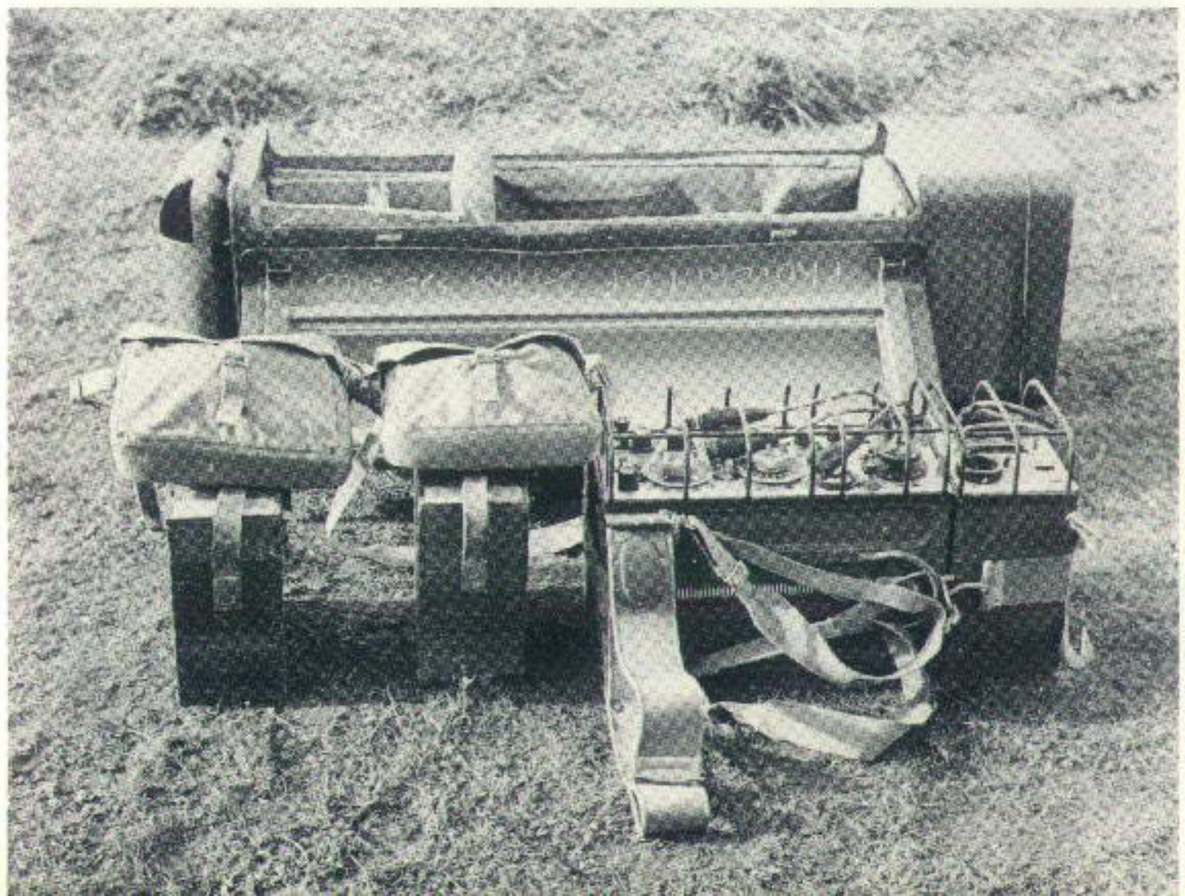


Hamilcar



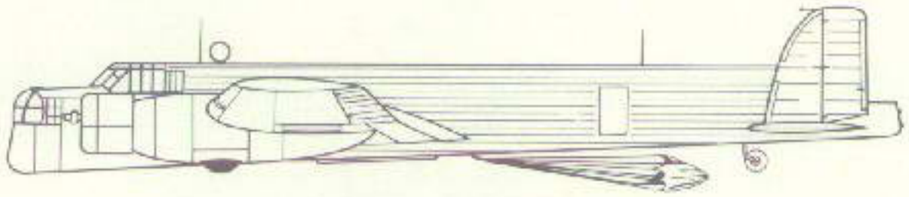
While a Bren gun team stands guard under the nose, a squad of airborne troops unload a jeep from a Horsa glider. The name on the nose of the Horsa (in White) is *'GIBBON'S SCOFERS'*.

This specially padded container was used by parachute troops for dropping radio sets. The container's bottom (left) was designed to serve as a shock absorber, and collapsed on landing.

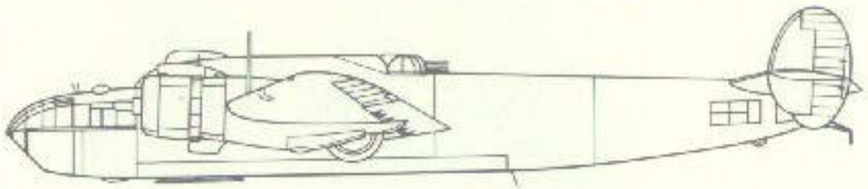


Transport/Glider Tow Aircraft

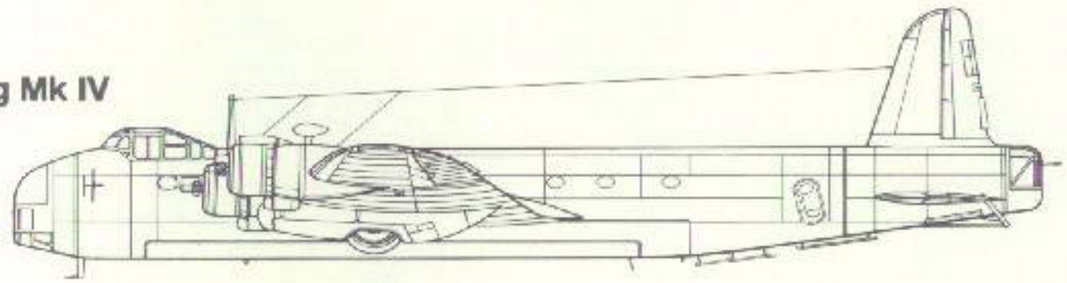
Whitley



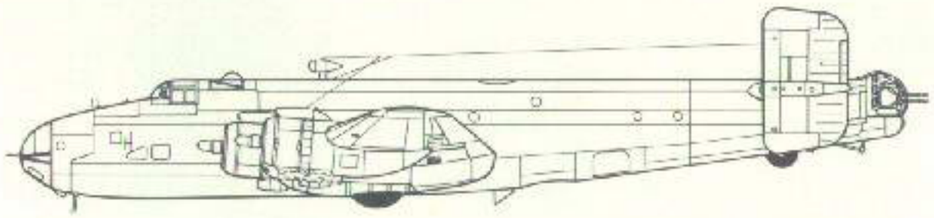
Albemarle



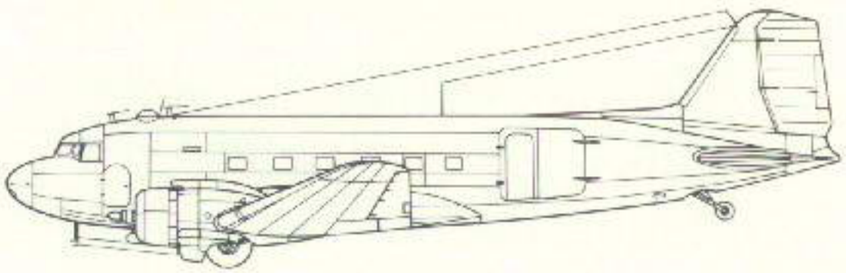
Stirling Mk IV



Halifax A III



Dakota (C-47)



This paratrooper is demonstrating the proper jump uniform. The circular object on the harness is the quick release harness catch, his Sten submachine is tucked into the parachute harness, his jump smock is snapped around his legs to keep it from blowing up, and his helmet strap is secured.

The inscription on the quick release mechanism in the center of this paratrooper's harness reads, "Turn to unlock" with an arrow in the direction of rotation and "Press to release." When pressed, the quick release unfastened all four harness straps.

Sten Mk 2 Submachine Gun

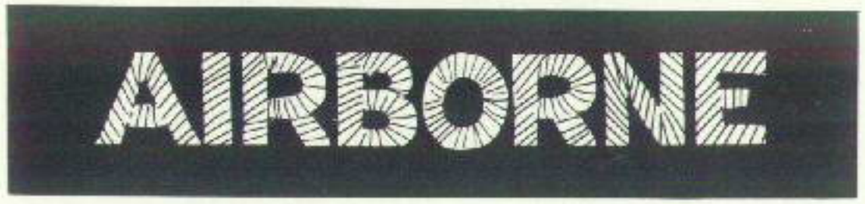
Airborne reconnaissance troops wore a special identification tab to distinguish them from other Airborne troops. These troops, standing at attention before boarding their transport aircraft, wear the *RECONNAISSANCE* tab on the left shoulder and a helmet identification flash.

Parachute Regiment Shoulder Arc

While the Sergeant in the foreground provides security with a Sten submachine gun, three other parachutists, including one armed with a Bren gun, retrieve their equipment from a container. The Bren gunner has a helmet flash painted on his helmet.

Pegasus Shoulder Insignia

Airborne Tab



Bruneval

A few months before the paratroops received their official regimental designation, they took part in their second raid on the European mainland. The raid was planned as a commando type operation intended to gain scientific intelligence on German radar developments. On 21 January 1942, Lord Mountbatten had submitted a proposal for a raid against a German radar site on the French coast. The site had been located by RAF photographic reconnaissance and offered a unique possibility to learn just how advanced the German radar was. To carry out the raid, Mountbatten asked for one company of parachute troops, a section of airborne engineers and several RAF radar technicians (who would be put through a quick parachute training course).

C Company of the 2nd Parachute Battalion, a unit comprised primarily of Scots under the command of MAJ John Frost, was selected for the mission. To maintain security, the paratroops of C Company were told that they were training for a demonstration jump for Churchill and the War Cabinet. As C Company trained for the operation, they were issued the new Sten submachine gun, becoming one of the first British units to receive this weapon. Only one of the RAF technicians actually joined the company for the raid, bringing the raiding force to 120 men (the second RAF technician had been injured during parachute training). To aid him, the radar technician trained a number of the airborne engineers to disassemble a radar set, although it was expected that they would do so under his supervision during the actual raid.

Since the men of C Company would be evacuated by sea after the operation, they moved to Inveraray, Scotland, to practice landing craft embarkation. While their training progressed, the French Resistance and British photo reconnaissance experts assembled the latest intelligence on the Bruneval radar site. As a training aid, the photo reconnaissance specialists built a detailed scale model of the radar site for the troops to study.

MAJ Frost's force was broken up into three groups consisting of forty men each. These groups would be dropped at intervals, with the first group jumping at 0015. The first party had the mission of securing the unit's line of retreat to the beach. The second party included the technicians who would disassemble the radar set, along with their covering force, while the third party was made up of the landward screen, which would also function as a rear guard during withdrawal. The company was dropped in sticks of ten men using camouflage parachutes.

Landing in snow, the men of the first party found that half their force had been dropped off course and was separated. With only twenty men, they had to secure the beach and their other objectives. After landing, the second group quickly seized the house near the radar set and began photographing and sketching the installation prior to disassembling it. Since they could not take the entire site, only the most critical components were removed to be taken back for study. A secondary mission was the capture of one or more German radar technicians, and two prisoners were secured.

During their withdrawal, the paratroops began taking heavy fire from the German garrison located about 400 yards from the site. As MAJ Frost and his men reached the beach, it appeared that their efforts would prove to be in vain since the landing craft that were to evacuate them were not there. Finally, at 0230 the landing craft arrived and extracted the raiders. Frost's force had carried out a highly successful raid both for intelligence gathering and for propaganda purposes since an important piece of German military equipment had been seized and spirited back to Great Britain. Unlike the earlier raid in Italy, the Bruneval raid also proved that paratroops could be safely extracted after carrying out a mission. The successful mission was not without cost; during the course of the raid C Company suffered two killed, six missing and six wounded.

Prior to boarding the transport aircraft for a jump, the officer and sergeant synchronize their watches. The parachutist's winged brevet is visible on the upper right shoulder of a number of these troops.

1st Airborne Division

The success of the paratroops at Bruneval led British planners to schedule the 1st Parachute Brigade to be part of a much larger raid planned against Dieppe during June of 1942. According to the plan, the paratroops' mission would be to destroy the coastal batteries east and west of the town. When the raid was postponed until August of 1942, however, the Commandos took over this mission from the paratroops. The 1st Parachute Brigade was now assigned a different mission as the Allies prepared to drive Field Marshall Rommel out of North Africa. In September of 1942, MGEN Browning was ordered to prepare the 1st Airborne Brigade for a combat jump in North Africa.

During November of 1942, another commando type operation was attempted using glider-borne troops. Two Horsa gliders carrying sappers were sent against the German heavy water plant in Norway, which was critical to German efforts to produce an atomic bomb. Both gliders, however, crashed in bad weather short of their objective and the survivors were quickly captured by the Germans. All these men were later killed by the Gestapo.

The training program at Ringway was now graduating some 1,500 new troops each month (including Allied personnel, SOE and OSS agents). This increase in trained personnel allowed the British to form the 1st Airborne Division, which became fully operational in May of 1943 under MGEN G.F. Hopkins. Major components of the division were the 1st Parachute Brigade, 2nd Parachute Brigade, 1st (Air-Landing) Brigade, and the 1st Airborne Light Regiment RA (Royal Artillery).

The 6th Airborne Division also began forming in May of 1943, under MGEN Richard Gale. The 3rd Parachute Brigade, comprising the 7th, 8th and 9th Parachute Battalions (drawn primarily from the Somerset Light Infantry, Royal Warwickshire Regiment, and Essex Regiment), was the 6th's initial component, followed by the 5th Parachute Brigade which comprised the Division's other parachute brigade. The 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion was also assigned to the 6th Division. The glider-borne element was the 6th (Air-Landing) Brigade, while the 53rd (Worcestershire Yoemanry) Airborne Light Regiment RA formed the artillery component, equipped with 75MM pack howitzers. A fairly substantial number of the air landing (glider) troops had also taken a shortened version of the parachute course (4 jumps) and could be parachuted into battle if necessary.

This airborne trooper is carrying the Number 22 wireless set in its canvas container attached to his harness. He is wearing the parachute brevet on his upper right sleeve.

A variety of special equipment is carried by this airborne trooper including a toggle rope, Fairbairn-Sykes dagger, camouflage netting face veil, and binoculars.

(Above) His Royal Highness, the King, examines an airborne forces jeep armed with a Vickers MG carried on a pintle mount on the passenger side. The jeep carries the airborne forces shield on the front bumper. Between missions the paratroops put on demonstrations for a number of high ranking officials.

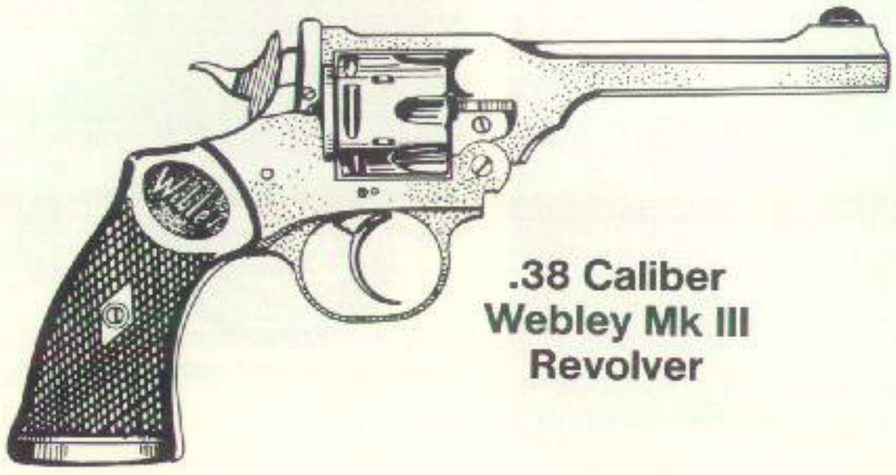
(Above) As part of their continuing recruiting efforts, Airborne troops put on displays of thei special equipment. Along with items of personal equipment, the display also included a ful size parachute, a Mark I parachute container and the Welbike, a collapsible motorbike.

(Left) A group of glider troops move out from a glider landing zone towing their heavier equip ment on a lightweight cart developed especially for the Airborne Forces.

Field training exercises often were visited by high ranking officials. GEN Bernard Montgomery inspects airborne troops and their equipment during a training exercise. The two men in the foreground are carrying the bipod (left) and tube (right) for a 3 inch mortar.

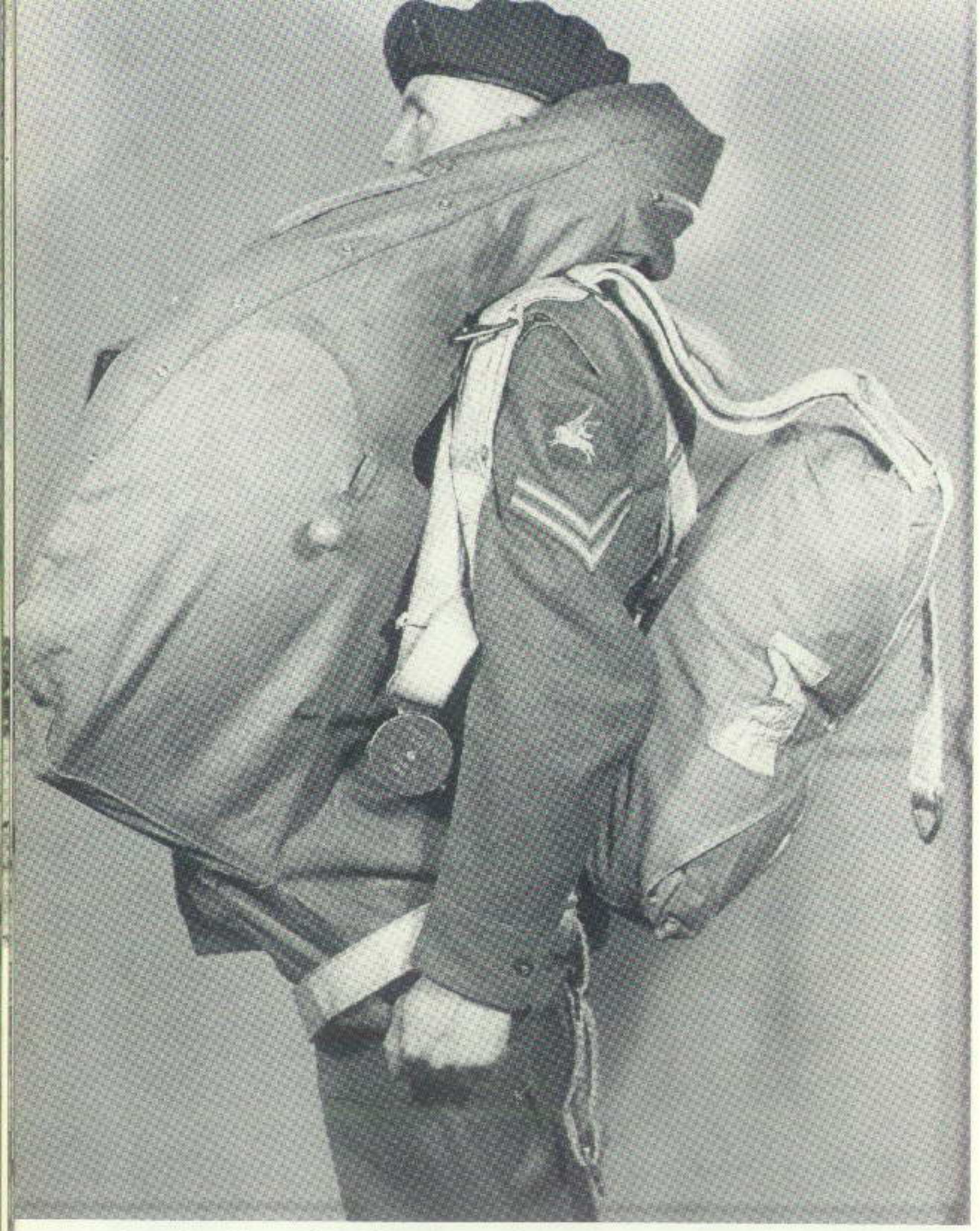
MGEN Gale, Commander of the 6th Airborne Division, discusses the layout of a paratroop field headquarters with GEN Montgomery during a large scale field training exercise.

Colt .32 Caliber
Automatic



.38 Caliber
Webley Mk III
Revolver

9MM Browning
Hi Power Automatic



A number of items of special equipment were developed for the Airborne Forces including this special life jacket which is being modeled in its fully inflated state. The small toggle on the life jacket activated a CO_2 cylinder to inflate the jacket.

These paratroops are assembling a collapsible Welbike which they have just retrieved from an equipment container. These troops are armed with .303 No 4 Lee Enfield rifles and a 9MM Sten submachine gun.

Welbike Collapsible Motorcycle

Folding Bicycle

(Above) A paratrooper rides off from a drop zone on a second pattern folding bicycle. These bicycles were equipped with a rack on the frame to hold a .303 Lee Enfield Mk 4 rifle.

(Right) A paratrooper demonstrates the light weight of this special motorcycle designed specifically for use by the airborne forces. These motorcycles were primarily used by reconnaissance teams and dispatch riders.

This paratrooper, standing in the door ready to jump, is carrying a Bren machine gun valise attached to his harness. The Bren gun was the standard light machine gun used by the Airborne forces.

Prior to a jump, each paratrooper hooked up his static line to the aircraft and checked it to be sure that the line would deploy properly on leaving the aircraft.

A paratrooper, carrying a weapons valise and kit bag, stands in the door of his Dakota (C-47) prior to jumping over Normandy.

A sergeant and a trooper, having a brewup, both wear the airborne beret with Parachute Regiment beret badge. The sergeant wears battle dress with his Fairbairn-Sykes knife carried in a special pocket on the trousers and the strap buttoned to keep it in place.

A parachute padre (chaplin) wears the early airborne helmet with the rubber rim. Even when dressed in his airborne uniform he still wears his minister's collar.

A PIAT gunner and his loader hiding in the rubble at Arnhem prepare to engage a German tank. The PIAT has a carrying strap attached to it and both paratroops wear the airborne helmet and Denison smock.

A paratrooper of the 1st Polish Independent Parachute Brigade in training prior to their combat jump at Arnhem, wears the rubber training helmet with Polish eagle, the sleeveless parachute smock worn by the Poles with a Poland tab on his shoulder and Polish collar insignia. He is armed with a Bren machine gun.

A member of the 5th (Scottish) Parachute Battalion wears his distinctive Balmoral bonnet with the Army Air Corps cap badge on a diamond of Hunting Stewart tartan. Although his headgear was distinct to his battalion, the Denison smock and Sten gun were typical of those used by other airborne troops at Arnhem.

After disembarking from his Horsa glider, this member of the Glider Pilot Regiment loads his Webley revolver prior to joining the glider troops he has delivered to Normandy. He wears Glider Pilot wings and the early pattern glider pilot's helmet.

A Canadian Major of the 1st (Canadian) Parachute Battalion talks on the Telephone Set Mk 5. He wears the maroon Parachute Regiment beret with a Canadian airborne beret badge. Other distinctions include the gold band on the shoulder loop designating his battalion, the distinctive shoulder sleeve insignia, and the Canada Volunteer Service Medal ribbon. The weapon leaning nearby is the Lee Enfield Rifle #4 Mark I.

An airborne reconnaissance trooper releases a carrier pigeon during the Normandy invasion. His Reconnaissance shoulder arc and the painted reconnaissance flash on his airborne helmet identify him as a member of a reconnaissance unit.

(Above) Prior to a jump, each man's equipment was inspected by the stick leader/jump master. The seated paratrooper is wearing a sleeveless paratrooper's jump smock and has an equipment duffel bag attached to his parachute harness which would be lowered below him on a line during his descent.

(Above) As other paratroops land in the background, a trooper works to open an equipment container. These containers could be carried on standard bomb racks of any Allied aircraft, including fighters and bombers.

(Left) Two paratroops assemble a collapsible cart which was used to haul heavy equipment and/or supplies. Often this work had to be done at night.

North Africa

On 8 November 1942, Operation TORCH was launched, with landings taking place at eleven points along the North African coast. These landings were the beginnings of an Allied push designed to drive Rommel off the African continent and secure a stepping stone for the invasion of Southern Europe. Although no British airborne forces were committed during the initial landings, on 12 November, 360 men of LTC R.J. Pine-Coffin's 3rd Battalion, 1st Parachute Brigade were delivered in American C-47s for a jump on Bone Airfield, located about half way between Algiers and Tunis. Their objective was to seize the airfield, which was accomplished without opposition. The parachutist's biggest problem, in fact, was that local Arabs stole equipment containers and parachutes. Joined by No 6 Commando, the men of the 3rd Battalion held Bone Airfield for a week until relieved by advancing Allied forces. During this period, the remainder of the 1st Parachute Brigade arrived at Algiers by sea and awaited orders at Maison Blanch Airfield.

The paratroop's next jump was on 16 November, when the men of the 1st Parachute Battalion dropped near Souk el Arba. Their mission was to act as a scouting force ahead of the British 1st Army. As they advanced, the paratroops so impressed the local French troops that many of them joined the battalion to fight alongside the British. On 6 December, the 3rd Battalion joined the 1st Battalion, with both units fighting as conventional light infantry under the tactical control of the Fifth Corps.

The 2nd Battalion, commanded by LTC J.D. Frost, however, had been held in reserve for a combat drop against the German airfields at Pont du Faha, Depienne, and Oudra. The attacks against these airfields were planned to destroy enemy aircraft on the ground in much the same manner as David Sterling's SAS unit had done in earlier raids. Just before takeoff on 29 November it was learned that the Germans had pulled out from the first two objectives and the 2nd Battalion was diverted to Oudra at 1450. Early the next morning they occupied the airfield and the local railway station, meeting with no German opposition. At approximately 0430 the Germans launched a counterattack supported by tanks and aircraft. Fortunately, the paratroops camouflage smocks and their training at blending into the terrain made them poor targets for strafing Bf 109s. Since there were no enemy aircraft on the airfield to attack, LTC Frost felt it was best to withdraw towards the advancing Allied army.

Although the paratroops were poorly armed to deal with tanks, they managed to use Gammon grenades (a grenade developed for airborne troops which consisted of a cloth bag equipped with a fuse which could then be stuffed with as much plastic explosive as the target required) to destroy or disable at least four German tanks.

During this fighting retreat they suffered some 260 casualties before finally linking up with other Allied forces. Once linked up, the paratroops stayed in action for another eight days. Those members of the 2nd Battalion that had been captured soon established a formidable reputation, since a number of them managed to kill their captors and escape.

By 25 January 1943 the entire 1st Parachute Brigade was reformed at Bone. For the next three months the brigade was used as a mobile reserve, committed to action wherever the fighting was heaviest. During this period they met their opposite numbers on the German side when they fought against tough German parachute engineers. The Germans were tough, but the British parachutists proved just as tough.

During one advance, the 1st Parachute Brigade took over 800 prisoners. The aggressiveness, which would win the British Airborne troops their nickname "The Red Devils" from the Germans, in North Africa was aptly illustrated when LTC Frost led his 2nd Battalion in a bayonet charge while blowing on a hunting horn. The horn had become his trademark and he used it to help his men find him when assembling after a jump.

Finally, on the night of 14/15 April 1943, the 1st Parachute Brigade was pulled out of combat to regroup for future airborne operations. During its period in combat, the brigade had been recognized by the awarding of 8 Distinguished Service Orders, 15 Military Crosses, 9 Distinguished Conduct Medals, and 22 Military Medals, along with a number of other awards.

Gammon Grenade

Sicily

During 1942, the Airborne Forces suffered from shortages of men, proper equipment, transport aircraft and glider pilots. In October of 1942 the Airborne forces suffered another setback when COL Rock, who had virtually created the Parachute Regiment, was killed in a glider crash. Despite these problems, the Airborne Forces were slated to play a key role in the British portion of Operation HUSKY, the Allied invasion of Sicily.

Since the Air-Landing Brigade was slated to be the first Allied troop to land on Sicily, the Glider Pilot Regiment, now under COL George Chatterton, was ordered to North Africa in April of 1943. During their work-up period, the pilots had to learn to fly the American built Waco CG-4 glider. The Wacos, however, were deemed unsuitable for the landing of anti-tank guns and their jeeps, so a number of the larger Horsa gliders were towed to North Africa by Halifax bombers. Despite the difficulties of towing gliders over such long distances, more than 80% of the gliders arrived safely.

By June of 1943, both the air-landing and parachute troops were rigorously training for their part in HUSKY, with the paratroops making almost 9,000 training jumps between 8 May and 30 June. The 6th Airborne Division under MGEN Richard Gale was activated in May of 1943, but, in the event, would not see action in Sicily.

The plan for the Sicily invasion called for four separate phases to the airborne assault, two by the Americans and two by the British. The first phase, Operation LEDBROKE, took place on the night of 9/10 July, when troops of the 1st Air-Landing Brigade under BGEN P.H.W. Hicks were sent in to seize the Ponte Grande Bridge near Syracuse. The troops were ferried to the target area aboard 129 Waco and eight Horsa gliders. In addition to securing the bridge, the glider-borne troops were to attack Syracuse itself from the west, creating a diversion to aid the amphibious landings. The commander of the 1st Airborne Division, MGEN "Hoppy" Hopkinson, accompanied the glider troops who were assigned two separate landing zones.

From the beginning things began to go bad for the glider troops; bad weather, including gale force winds of up to 45 MPH, forced a number of the glider tugs and their gliders off course. Other tugs released their gliders too early causing them to land in the sea off of Sicily, while still other gliders were forced down by German anti-aircraft fire. Even more frustrating was the malfunction of the intercoms on a number of gliders, which prevented the tow pilots from informing the glider pilot of the release point. Few of the gliders landed in their assigned landing zones, while some landed as much as forty miles off course.

The airborne troops, however, were trained to go into action under any circumstances and those who landed near the bridge captured it and removed the demolition charges which had been placed by the Italians. By the early morning of 10 July, there were a total of eighty-seven airborne troops armed with two mortars and four Bren guns dug in around the bridge. Throughout the morning they came under heavy enemy artillery fire, which inflicted substantial casualties and by 1530 that afternoon only a few of the original force remained to defend the bridge. These few paratroops were finally overrun, but they had held the bridge long enough. Before the Germans could destroy the bridge, British 8th Army infantry, advancing from the beaches, arrived and retook the bridge. A few of the paratroops had been captured when the bridge was overrun, but they were quickly freed when other Red Devils ambushed their Italian guards. A number of glider troops who had landed in error near an emplacement of Italian coastal defense guns had seized the opportunity and attacked these guns rather than try to reach their original objective. Their spontaneous attack diverted attention from the beaches at a critical time and saved a number of lives in the landing force.

Her Royal Highness, the Queen, pauses in her inspection of Airborne troops prior to Operation HUSKY to talk with a member of the Royal Army Medical Corps. The weapon in the background is a Bren light machine gun.

The King, Queen, and Princess Royal inspect airborne troops and their weapons. The weapon in the foreground is a Projector Infantry Anti-Tank (PIAT) weapon which fired a mortar type round. Besides anti-tank rounds, the PIAT could fire smoke and anti-personnel rounds.

The Royal party inspects airborne engineer equipment, including a lightweight folding cart, camouflage netting, and explosives.

A platoon commander of the Air-Landing Brigade directs his men from the cover of a thicket. He is armed with a Mk V Sten submachine gun which had a wooden stock, pistol grip, and forearm pistol grip.

With Syracuse secured, the 8th Army began its advance northwards. Along the route of advance towards Catania was another key bridge, the Primosole bridge over the river Simeto. A force of 1,836 paratroops and seventy-seven glider artillerymen of the 1st Airborne Division were assigned to seize this bridge ahead of the 8th Army's advance. The three parachute battalions of the 1st Parachute Brigade, the 1st Parachute Squadron of the Royal Engineers, the 16th Parachute Squadron of the Royal Engineers, and the 16th Parachute Field Ambulance augmented by an airborne anti-tank unit were committed to the assault. The entire force was under the command of BRIG Lathbury.

The plan of action called for two of the parachute platoons and the Royal Engineer Squadrons to seize the bridge, while the remaining forces silenced an anti-aircraft battery located nearby. Once these objectives were secured, the paratroops would establish a bridgehead across the river and hold the high ground to the south of the bridge.

The first sticks were dropped shortly after 2200 on 13 July. Their approach to the target area had been over the sea and as they passed over the Allied invasion fleet, they were fired on by friendly naval forces and a number of aircraft and gliders were shot down. As the survivors crossed over the beach, they came under fire from enemy anti-aircraft guns, which severly decimated the force. The anti-aircraft fire caused the transports and glider tugs to become widely scattered, losing any chance for a coordinated drop. Despite the bad situation, by 0215 on the morning of 14 July, about fifty men of the 1st Parachute Battalion had taken the bridge. By dawn they had removed the demolition charges from the bridge and, as additional troops arrived, set about defending it with two mortars, a Vickers machine gun, and three PIAT anti-tank weapons. By early morning there were 120 paratroops in the perimeter.

Ironically, German paratroops had jumped into the same drop zone as some of the British parachutists at almost the same time, which made for some "interesting" encounters as both groups attempted to recover their equipment containers. Many of these chance encounters led to pitched hand-to-hand combat.

During the day of 14 July, reinforcements arrived to help defend the bridge and high ground. That afternoon the German paratroops launched a heavy counter-attack; however, three anti-tank guns served by members of the Glider Pilot Regiment helped repulse the attacks. Another German attack came at 1700 with heavy artillery support. This attack forced the defenders, who were running short of ammunition, to retreat to the southern bank of the river. As they ran out of ammunition for their own weapons, a number of British airborne troops continued to fight using captured Italian weapons and ammunition.

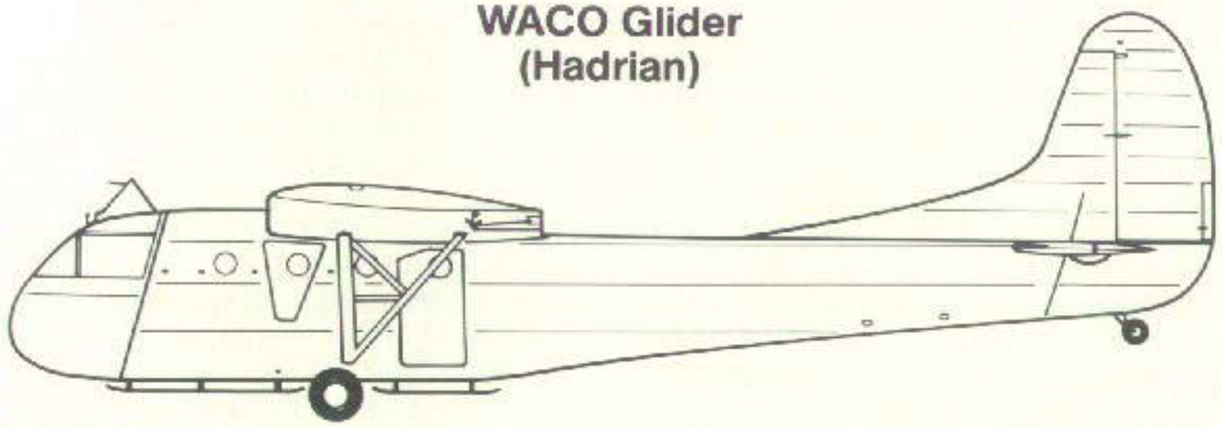
Finally, at 1900 the Red Devils were forced to withdraw from the bridge. They withdrew in small groups, with the intention of rejoining Allied units advancing toward the bridge. Once again they had held just long enough, as tanks of the 4th Armored Brigade rumbled up just after dark on the 14th. During the fighting the 1st Parachute Brigade had suffered almost 300 casualties.

Though problems with friendly fire and scattering had plagued the airborne portions of the Sicily operation, the airborne forces had still managed to create enough chaos behind the lines of the Axis defenders to substantially aid the amphibious landings. Airborne planners studied the after action reports with an eye toward avoiding such problems in the future. These same planners were already at work planning even larger airborne operations and the lessons learned in Sicily would go a long way in making their jobs easier.

A signals trooper of the Air-Landing Brigade uses a compact radio transceiver to communicate with other units of the brigade. One drawback of these radios was their limited range.

A group of airborne chaplains, known as the parachute padres. These men usually accompanied the troops into the field, even on combat jumps.

WACO Glider
(Hadrian)



Italy

After the Allied invasion of Sicily, the Italians lost most of their desire for war and began clandestine negotiations to end Italian resistance. An armistice was to be announced on 8 September 1943, timed to coincide with an Allied invasion of the Italian mainland. The 1st Airborne was assigned the important seaport of Taranto as their objective during the invasion of Italy; however, since transport aircraft were unavailable, the Red Devils were to be landed from a minelayer and cruiser in two increments. The first units were landed on the afternoon of 8 September, being guided safely ashore by an Italian pilot. They initially met with no opposition; however, 130 troops and a substantial amount of equipment were lost when the minelayer hit a mine and sunk.

With the 2nd Parachute Brigade ashore and holding the port, the 4th Parachute Brigade landed and advanced out of the port area. Spear-heading the advance was the 156th Parachute Battalion which gained a degree of mobility by commandeering civilian buses, jeeps, and bicycles. At Mottola, the paratroops encountered light enemy resistance, which was quickly overcome. This action cost the paratroops one important casualty, when the division commander, GEN Hopkinson, was killed in the fighting. Using captured Italian artillery for fire support, the paratroops pushed on toward Castellaneta.

By the evening of 12 September, the entire division was ashore and Castellaneta had been captured. Although the airborne troops were now heavily overextended, they pushed on towards Gioia. The town had an important airfield which had been evacuated by the Germans on the night of 16/17 September. On 19 September, the 1st Air-Landing Brigade relieved the 4th Parachute Brigade, but Taranto still had to be held so the 1st Airborne troopers dug in around the port between 20 and 23 September. The men of the 1st Air Landing Brigade, along with a number of paratroops continued to pursue the retreating Germans occupying Foggia. During this operation, the division's reconnaissance squadron was constantly scouting ahead of the brigade.

During early October, CAPT J. Timothy and seven other paratroops of the 2nd Parachute Battalion took part in a drop north of Rescara with the mission of finding escaped Allied prisoners and directing them towards Allied lines. This action was the forerunner of one of the most interesting airborne units of the Second World War — the SAARF (Special Allied Airborne Reconnaissance Force). This special unit was formed late in the war with the mission of dropping in near POW camps and taking charge of freed prisoners.

By November, the 1st Airborne Division had been withdrawn to England, with the exception of the 2nd Parachute Brigade which remained in Italy under BRIG C.H.K. Pritchard. Operating in the Eastern Mediterranean (independently of the 1st Airborne Division) was the 11th Parachute Battalion, which had been formed at Kabrit. On the night of 14 September, this battalion was dropped on the island of Cos into a drop zone marked by members of the SBS (Special Boat Service). The Italian garrison of Cos was so happy to see the British paratroops that they had spread straw on the landing zone to cushion their landings! Heavy Luftwaffe attacks and a threatened German landing, however, led to the parachute troops being pulled off of Cos on 25 September.

Airborne padre REV J. Gwinnott wears an interesting combination of insignia. The Royal Army Chaplain arc is above the parachute brevet, followed by the Pegasus shoulder sleeve insignia and Airborne tab. REV Gwinnott accompanied the 1st Airborne into Arnhem.

Normandy

After the formation of the 6th Airborne Division during mid-1943, GEN Browning established an Airborne Corps Headquaters to control both the 6th and the 1st Airborne Divisions. As the preparations for the invasion of Western Europe progressed, it became apparent that large formations of gliders would be involved in the airborne assault and throughout late 1943 large-scale glider exercises were conducted.

On 17 February 1944, MGEN Gale received orders slating one of his two parachute brigades to be dropped on the flank of the British amphibious forces during the cross-channel invasion. It became obvious, however, that a brigade would be too small for the task and the orders were changed to include the entire 6th Airborne Division. As divisional intelligence officers studied the possible drop and landing zones, the parachute and glider troops were honed to a fine edge through a series of rigorous and realistic training exercises; one such exercise, on 24 April 1944, involved virtually the entire 6th Airborne Division.

Montgomery, who would command the British invasion forces, wanted the 6th Airborne committed to help hold the left flank of the British beachhead. Although initially it was planned that the gliders of the 6th Air Landing Brigade would go in during the night prior to the invasion, the German anti-glider defenses in the area indicated that there was a strong likelihood that there would be excessive casualties during a night landing. It was decided, therefore, that the two parachute brigades would jump in during the night, while two battalions of glider troops would reinforce the airhead late on D-Day. A third glider battalion would be landed over the beaches because of a shortage of transport aircraft.

As the invasion approached, the airborne commanders, as well as other senior officers involved in planning the invasion, worried about their biggest single problem — the weather. German weather experts, in fact, had definitely stated to the German High Command that no invasion could take place during the first week of June, 1944. The paratroops and glidermen of the 6th Airborne, as well as their American counterparts of the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions (who would jump in on the right flank of the British paratroops) let the experts worry about the weather. They were more concerned with equipping themselves with as much ammunition as possible and mentally preparing to jump into combat — at night.

Slightly after midnight on 6 June, the first British pathfinders of the 22nd Independent Parachute Company landed and began marking the drop zones and landing zones with lights. The landing zones were for gliders which would come in during that first night carrying anti-tank guns and other heavy equipment. Once the LZs were marked, the pathfinders would be followed by the men of the 3rd and 5th Parachute Brigades.

The 3rd Parachute Brigade, commanded by BRIG J.S. Hill, had three primary missions; destroy the enemy artillery battery at Merville, destroy four bridges over the River Dives to prevent German reinforcements from reaching the beaches, and cut the roads leading towards the beachhead from the south and east. In general, they were to create as much havoc among the German defenses from the rear as possible and slow any attempted German reinforcement of the defenses near the beaches.

The Merville battery was an extremely important objective and was housed in bunkers with walls over six feet thick. The main 75MM (although originally thought to be 150MM) gun emplacements were surrounded by machine guns, anti-aircraft guns, barbed wire, minefields, and other defenses manned by about 150-200 German troops. The 9th Parachute Battalion plus three gliders with fifty volunteers from the paratroops and eight Royal Engineers were to land right on top of the battery in an attempt to duplicate the German success at Eben Emael early in the war. The 9th was commanded by LTC

Pathfinders synchronize their watches prior to jumping in ahead of the Normandy invasion forces. Pathfinders marked the drop zones with lights for the main body of troops that followed.

T.B.H. Otway, who had led his men through numerous live-fire rehearsals on a mockup of the battery built near Newbury.

As it turned out, only 150 of the 600 paratroops of the 9th Battalion reached the rendezvous on time where they joined up with their reconnaissance party which had dropped earlier. The recon team had already begun cutting the fences surrounding the battery and had found a path through the minefields. As the men of the assault force approached the battery they came under heavy German machine gun fire. Most of their equipment had been lost during the drop and the paratroops had only one machine gun of their own. The crew of this weapon managed to silence three of the enemy guns, while the remaining three were destroyed by direct assault.

The three gliders did not, in fact, land on top of the battery, although one landed nearby and its occupants prevented a German platoon from reinforcing the battery. After tough hand-to-hand fighting, Otway's assault force managed to capture the battery. The paratroops then spiked the guns, taking them out of action. The raid had cost the paratroops some seventy casualties.

Otway's remaining force then advanced to the village of Hauger, where they encountered heavy enemy resistance forcing them to dig in. The village was cleared with the assistance of Commandos from the 1st Special Service Brigade who linked up with the paratroops later in the day.

The other objectives assigned to the paratroops were destroyed as well; the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion, although scattered, managed to destroy two of the bridges over the Dives river, while the 8th Parachute Battalion assisted by sappers of the Royal Engineers destroyed three other bridges. Other Royal Engineers cleared glider landing zones by blowing down the poles which the Germans had emplaced in open areas to prevend glider landings. Once these zones were clear, the gliders carrying the Brigade's heavy equipment were scheduled to land.

(Above) Parachute troops undergo equipment checks in preparation for boarding their transports for Operation OVERLORD, the invasion of Normandy. The RAF officer at the right is the jumpmaster.

The 5th Brigade, under BRIG J.H.N. Poett, was assigned to land north of Ranville. Their missions were to seize the Orne River and Caen Canal crossings, secure and hold the area around the villages of Benouville and Ranville, and secure the landing zones where the gliders were to land. To seize the crossings, 6 gliders carrying assault troops of the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry and a party of Royal Engineers would land nearby, while members of the 7th Parachute Battalion would jump in to support them.

The three gliders assigned to land near the Caen Canal came in right on target, and the bridge was in British hands in fifteen minutes from the time their first glider landed. The troopers then dug in to defend the bridge after making sure that it had not been wired for demolition by the Germans. Once again the value of the PIAT (Projector, Infantry, Anti-Tank) was proven, when one was used to knocked out one of three German tanks that attempted to retake the bridge. At the Orne River Bridge, one glider was right on target, but the other two landed about 400 yards away. Despite this, the bridge was quickly seized. Although they suffered some casualties during the drop, the paratroops of the 7th Parachute Battalion jumped in and reinforced the defenders of the two strategic bridges.

Against heavy German counterattacks, they continued to hold the bridges throughout the day, even fighting off German gunboats on the canal. German armored forces also attempted to dislodge the airborne troops, and Private McGee won DCM for destroying one of them with a Gammon grenade. Along with the battle for the Merville Battery, the capture and defense of the Caen Canal bridge — the "Pegasus Bridge" — would become an important part of British Airborne tradition.

On the evening of 6 June, additional reinforcements arrived by glider enabling the airborne forces to hold their ground until reinforced by commandos of 1st Special Service Brigade advancing out of the beachhead.

Other units of the 5th Parachute Brigade, including the 12th and 13th Parachute Battalions, had jumped at about 0100 on 6 June with the mission of securing the village of La Bas de Ranville and the surrounding area. Reinforced during the evening by glider troops of the Royal Ulster Rifles, who brought with them a number of badly needed anti-tank guns, the airborne troops held off a number of German counterattacks, knocking

(Left) Paratroops board a Armstrong Whitworth Ablemarle transport painted with D-Day invasion stripes for their drop into occupied France. The Ablemarle could carry ten fully equipped paratroops.

Paratrooper
Jump
Helmet

out several German PzKfw IV tanks in the process. Again the paratroops and glider troops held until relieved by the members of #1 Commando.

On the evening of 6 June, the gliders carrying the 6th Air-Landing Brigade landed in the LZs cleared and held for their arrival by the paratroops who had preceded them. The decision to wait until late on D-Day to bring the gliders in proved a good one since casualties were surprisingly light. Additionally, the arrival of fresh troops at that point was just the shot in the arm the airborne forces needed to hold their objectives. By the end of the second day, the 6th Airborne Division, reinforced by the 1st Special Service Brigade, was holding positions on the eastern bank of the Orne River.

During the D-Day operations, the division suffered about 800 casualties with an additional 1,000 paratroops unaccounted for after the drop. A number of these missing men were, in fact, fighting alongside American paratroops in the American sector.

The airborne forces had to fight off increasingly heavy counterattacks, although fortunately they received good artillery support from their own gunners and from gunners within the beachhead. By 10 June , however, the heavy casualties suffered by the airborne troops had lowered their strength to the point that they were having trouble holding the Germans. On 11 June MGEN Gale decided to launch an attack to throw the Germans back and restore the British line. Together with the 51st Division, the airborne troops launched their counterattack led by the 12th Parachute Battalion and B Company, 12th Battalion, the Devonshire Regiment. The attack succeeding in closing a gap in the British line and restablishing defensive cohesiveness.

Through the remainder of June, July, and the first weeks of August, the 6th Airborne continued to hold their positions despite the fact they were not equipped nor supported properly for sustained combat. Finally, on 17 August, the airborne troops were ordered to advance, spearheading the thrust to Le Havre. On 26 August, men of the 6th Airborne reached the Seine where they were halted and told to prepare for withdrawl back to the UK for rest and resupply. While in Normandy, the 6th Airborne had not only proven that the airborne forces could carry out a division-sized airborne operation but also that paratroops could carry out sustained combat operations. Normandy, however, was expensive, with the Division loosing a total of 4,457 casualties.

(Above) Pathfinders, wearing the Parachute Regiment cap badge which was authorized in May of 1943, are briefed about their objectives prior to jumping in behind the invasion beaches at Normandy.

(Right) Troops of an air-landing unit read the graffiti painted and chalked on the side of a Horsa glider bound for the invasion of France. Horsas made up the bulk of the gliders used by the British forces in Normandy.

Cap Badges

Glider Pilot Badge

Early Airborne Beret Badge

Late Airborne Beret Badge

Airborne troops have a cup of tea before taking off to drop over Normandy. The trooper at the far left has his fighting knife slipped into a sheath held by tabs sewn to the legs of his battle dress in the fashion preferred by many commandos and airborne troops.

Horsa gliders of the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry crash landed along the Caen Canal. The gliders came in right on target allowing the troops to quickly capture the bridges over the canal.

British Glider troops of the 6th Airborne Division march across the Caen Canal Bridge during the Normandy invasion. The bridge was captured by three glider loads of troops within fifteen minutes from the time the first glider landed.

Four members of a Combined Operations Bombardment Unit. These troops called in naval gunfire in support of British airborne troops during the Normandy invasion. The second from the left man wears a Royal Navy shoulder arc along with his Parachute Regiment beret. The other three troops are all wearing Denison smocks.

(Above) Members of the 5th Parachute Brigade guard a vital cross road outside the village of Ranville during the Normandy invasion. These troops had been reinforced by Horsa gliders carrying the Royal Ulster Rifles on the evening of 6 June.

(Right) Members of the British 12th Parachute Battalion give a cheerful "Thumbs up" during a lull in the action. The Battalion fought behind German lines during much of Operation OVERLORD.

(Above) British paratroops pose with local French civilians. French civilians were often an invaluable source of local intelligence on the disposition of German forces during the Normandy invasion.

Major General R.N. Gale, Commander of the British 6th Airborne Division during Operation OVERLORD, the Normandy invasion.

(Right) Field Marshal Sir Bernard Montgomery poses with senior officers of the 6th Airborne Division just prior to the D-Day operations.

(Above) Three of the first British glider troops to land in France during the Normandy invasion. Their glider touched down at 0020 on D-Day, 6 June 1944.

Operation ANVIL

When the 1st Airborne Division had been pulled out of Italy, the 2nd Independent Parachute Brigade remained to give Allied commanders an in-theater airborne capability. Attached to the 2nd New Zealand Division, the 2nd Independent Parachute Brigade fought as ground infantry on the Adriatic front, establishing a reputation for carrying out aggressive patrols against the Germans. They also established their own parachute school at Gioio and later at Lido di Roma to train replacements.

In June of 1944, sixty men of the 6th Parachute Battalion carried out a small drop to prevent German demolition of key objectives as part of Operation HASTY. At one point, an entire German brigade was tied down trying to counter the activities of the few dozen parachutists, most of whom managed to exfiltrate after the operation to rejoin their battalion.

On 15 August, the 2nd Independent Parachute Brigade took part in Operation ANVIL, the Allied invasion of the South of France. To support the Allied amphibious landings on the French coast between Cannes and Toulon, paratroops would fly across the Mediterranean from Rome and be dropped in the night before to disrupt German defenses and take key choke points.

Operating as part of the joint American/British 1st Airborne Task Force under MGEN R.T. Frederick, U.S. Army (who had commanded the joint US/Canadian 1st Special Service Force), the Task Force was made up of five US parachute battalions, one US air-landing brigade and the 2nd Independent Parachute Brigade. The entire force was to be airlifted in by the US Army Air Force 51st Troop Carrier Wing flying C-47 transports. A total of sixty-one Waco and Horsa gliders would follow the paratroops carrying their support weapons and supplies.

The 2nd was tasked with taking a critical road intersection in the village of Le Muy. The pathfinders jumped at 0330 and marked the DZ; however, only seventy-three of 126 sticks dropped that night landed on target. The 5th Parachute Battalion in particular was widely scattered over some twenty-five miles of French territory, but as usual those paratroops dropped off course managed to create havoc in the enemy rear areas, while those landing on or near the DZ seized their objectives with the assistance of local *Maquis* (resistance) forces against light opposition. By 1015 all objectives were under British control, and on 17 August paratroops of the 2nd Independent Parachute Brigade linked up with the Allied amphibious forces. Finally, on 26 August, the paratroops were pulled back to Italy.

(Right) Wearing their respective flags, British and American paratroops of the 1st Airborne Task Force take a breather beside a French farm house on 15 August 1944, D-Day for the invasion of Southern France.

Arnhem

In an attempt to drive across the Rhine and deliver a quick blow which would shorten the war, Field Marshal Montgomery came up with a plan named Operation MARKET GARDEN. The airborne portion of this plan, known as MARKET, called for the U.S. 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions and the British 1st Airborne Division to seize key bridges along an invasion route which would allow Montgomery's 2nd Army to flank the Seigfried Line and break out into the North German plain. The ground portion, spearheaded by LTGEN Brian Horrocks' XXX Corps was known as GARDEN.

On 10 September 1944, MGEN R. E. Urquhart, commanding officer of the 1st Airborne, received his orders for MARKET from LTGEN F.A.M. Browning. At the time, the division consisted of the 1st Parachute Brigade (1st, 2nd, and 3rd Parachute Battalions), the 4th Parachute Brigade (10th, 11th, and 156th Parachute Battalions), the 1st Air-Landing Brigade (1st Battalion, the Border Regiment; 2nd Battalion, South Staffordshire Regiment; 7th Battalion, King's Own Scottish Borders), as well as Pathfinder, airborne artillery, airborne engineer, airborne signals and other specialist troops.

The plan called for the operation to be launched on 17 September 1944, giving Urquhart and his staff only six days to plan for the operation. Although the airborne planners were used to short notice for possible operations, they had a number of special difficulties in planning the Arnhem jump. First, the U.S. airborne divisions received priority on the transport aircraft due to the fact that they had to capture the bridges closest to XXX Corps' jump off point. As a result Urquhart had to plan on bringing in his division and the attached 1st Polish Parachute Brigade in three separate lifts. Complicating matters even more, the RAF insisted on using drop zones that were rather far away from the Arnhem bridge, which was the divisional objective.

As the plan evolved, it called for the 21st Independent Parachute Company to jump in first to mark the drop and landing zones. They would be followed by the 1st Parachute Brigade and part of the 1st Air-Landing Brigade. On the second day, the 4th Parachute Brigade and the remainder of the 1st Air-Landing Brigade would arrive. Finally, on the third day, the 1st Polish Parachute Brigade would land. Intelligence reports indicated that only decimated German units were located around Arnhem and blocking XXX Corps. In evaluating the plan, however, LTGEN Browning made his famous comment that he feared they were going a "a bridge too far."

The intelligence reports proved to be wrong and, in reality, powerful German forces had escaped from France into Holland and were in the process of regrouping around Arnhem. Among these German units were the remnants of the 9th and 10th SS Panzer Divisions. Additionally, *Generalobersts* Kurt Student, the commander of the German Airborne Forces, was in the Arnhem sector. His knowledge of airborne tactics and methods would greatly assist the Germans in countering the landings.

On top of everything else, a British officer aboard a shot down glider was found to be carrying, against orders, the complete plans for the operation. These plans were passed to Student and relayed to higher German headquarters. The plans stated that if the 1st Airborne could seize and hold the Arnhem Bridge for forty-eight hours, the armored spearhead of XXX Corps would break through the German lines to link up with them. Armed with this information, the Germans moved in forces strong enough to make sure that this did not happen.

At 1015 on the morning of 17 September, the men of 21st Independent Parachute Company took off to mark the drop zones. Their drop met with little resistance and they quickly accomplished their mission. Since it was a daylight drop, a large percentage of the 1st Parachute Brigade landed right on target and quickly began advancing toward its objectives, the Arnhem Bridge and a nearby pontoon bridge. As the battalions moved out, Dutch civilians, many wearing orange (the colors of the House of Orange) greeted them as liberators. LTC John Frost's 2nd Parachute Battalion approached the Arnhem Bridge from the south, while the 3rd Parachute Battalion began advancing on the bridge from the north. C Company of the 2nd Parachute Battalion was detached to seize the railway bridge; however, the Germans successfully destroyed the bridge before the paratroops reached it.

By 2000, Frost and his HQ Company had reached the huge Arnhem Bridge. Soon Frost had a mixed force of his own 2nd Battalion and a few 6 pounder anti-tank guns of the 1st Light Regiment holding the northern end of the bridge, although SS Panzer Grenadiers remained in control of the southern end. By dawn on 18 September, Frost had between 600-700 men in buildings around the bridge.

Frost's force made various attempts to drive across the bridge; however, each was repulsed by fierce German fire. LT J.H. Grayburn won one of the many Victoria Crosses awarded to men of the 1st Airborne at Arnhem during one of these attacks. In an attempt to reinforce Frost, the 1st Battalion was engaged in heavy street fighting throughout the 18th but could not break through. Using anti-tank guns, PIATs, and Gammon grenades, the paratroops managed to knock out a number of German tanks, but these were quickly replaced.

By the second day of the battle, the majority of the 3rd Parachute Battalion had become casualties in the deadly house to house fighting within Arnhem. The casualties included BRIG G.W. Lathbury, CO of the 1st Parachute Brigade, who was wounded and out of action.

Members of the 1st Airborne Division check their harness and equipment prior to boarding their aircraft for Operation MARKET GARDEN, their objective was the capture of the road bridge at Arnhem, Holland.

The 1st-Air-Landing Brigade had spent the first day guarding the LZs, but on the second day it became obvious that men of this brigade would have to be committed to the battle for the bridge. MGEN Urquhart was out of communication and pinned down in Arnhem, and BRIG Hicks of the 1st Air-Landing Brigade assumed command. Communications became a major problem with the commanders being out of touch with most of the parachute units in the house to house fighting.

When the second lift arrived over the DZ, the Germans were waiting for them. The captured plans had detailed the arrival times and drop zones for the drops and the Germans had sited these areas with heavy anti-aircraft defenses. Despite heavy fire, BRIG Hackett's 4th Parachute Brigade jumped in and prepared to occupy the high ground at Kuepel. The 4th had the mission of securing the perimeter around the airhead.

With great difficulty, Frost's force at the bridge fought off repeated German counter attacks, taking heavy casualties. On Tuesday, Urquhart managed to return through German lines to his HQ and take control of the battle, although there was little he could do for Frost. The paratroops around the bridge now began to run low on ammunition. The other parachute battalions trying to reach Frost ran into heavy resistance from Panzer grenadiers supported by armor and quickly bogged down. The fighting in the western parts of Arnhem was especially confused and, at great loss, some troops managed to fight within a half mile of the bridge. Here they were stopped and none managed to link up with Frost.

Urquhart's force was already in deep trouble as the time they had expected to link up with XXX Corps arrived. Yet the relief column was nowhere in sight — it was held up by stiff German resistance some miles away. Supplies became critical for the airborne troops since the resupply drops had been made into LZs that were in German hands. Additionally, the Germans had captured one of the division's main supply dumps.

Members of the 1st Airborne Division, wearing maroon berets and Denison smocks, enjoy a quick meal before boarding American C-47 Skytrain transports for their drop over Holland during Operation MARKET GARDEN.

British 1st Airborne Division troops drop from three American C-47 transports on the outskirts of Arnhem. The aircraft in the background has just dropped four equipment containers.

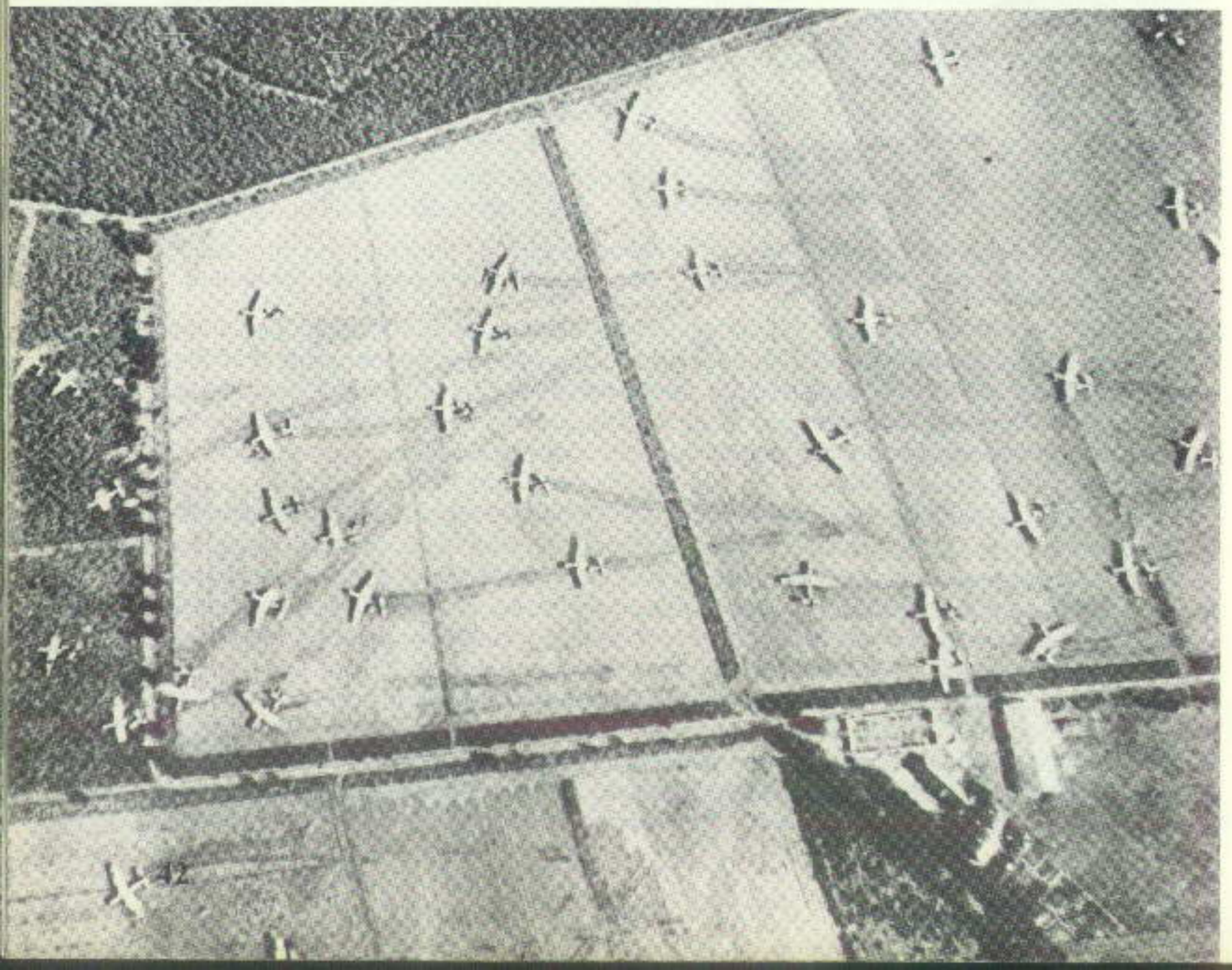
So confused was the house to house fighting that the parachute troops often found themselves firing at each other. To identify each other, the men began using their battlecry from North Africa, "Woha, Mahommed", which the Germans had trouble pronouncing. Frost's position was deteriorating rapidly, and, by nightfall on 19 September, the buildings sheltering his force were in rubble and Tiger tanks were attacking his positions.

Early on the morning of 20 September, BRIG Hackett's 4th Brigade came under heavy German attack, while bad weather prevented the drop of the Polish brigade to reinforce the outnumbered 1st Airborne. During the day, Frost's battalion was barely holding the bridge, but they were out of food and water. As the day progressed, Frost's heroic force was being burned out of their positions by German flame throwers and phosphorous shells.

By the morning of 21 September, there appeared to be some hope for relief as armored troops of XXX Corps pushed across the Waal river at Nijimegen and were ready to drive toward Arnhem. The Germans, however, had already driven Frost's survivors from the bridge area and by 0900, the bridge was open to German traffic which poured across towards the remaining pockets of resistance.

1st Airborne paratroops and gliderman converge on one of the drop/landing zones outside of Arnhem. The gliders have already had their tail sections removed so that vehicles and equipment could be quickly unloaded and brought into action.

Gliders litter the landing zone on the outskirts of Arnhem. From the wheel marks in the field, it is quite apparent that the landing roll of the Horsa was short and that glider landings were rough. At least five gliders have overshot the landing zone and crashed into the trees.



The 2nd Battalion's stand would become legendary. The paratroops had held out twice as long as expected, in the face of overwhelming opposition. Urquhart wanted to at least hold the bridgehead at Hartenstein with XXX Corps close to a possible link up, but the Germans attacked putting their position under increasing pressure. Shortages of water, food, medical supplies and ammunition were the major problems for the remnants of the division fighting within their shrinking defensive pocket.

On the 21st, the 1st Polish Parachute Brigade jumped in under heavy anti-aircraft fire; however, they jumped on the opposite side of the Neder Rijn river. During the night of 22 September, a few Poles made it across the river by rubber rafts to link up with the British airborne troops, but their numbers and the supplies they brought were insufficient to change the outcome of the battle. XXX Corps itself was still delayed in reaching the opposite river bank because of numerous road blocks and heavy German resistance along their route of advance.

Finally, on the night of 24 September, Urquhart signaled that the 1st Airborne could no longer hold their positions and would pull out that night. The pullout began late on 24 September and carried on into 25 September. The men pulled out a few at a time to prevent the Germans from breaking through during the evacuation. About 1,700 men of the 1st Airborne and over 400 Glider Pilot Regiment members made it across the river during the night. Hundreds more escaped through the German lines over the next weeks to rejoin their units, although very few from Frost's battalion made it back.

The drop had, indeed, been "a bridge too far". The landing failed for a number of reasons. The German strength in the area was underestimated, the speed that XXX Corps could advance along a single contested road was overestimated and the drop itself was too far from the objective. This last factor ran counter to basic airborne tactics that accepted heavier initial casualties in order to land right on the objective. The three day incremental drop squandered the division's strength and never allowed them to consolidate their positions. Finally, less than ten percent of the resupply drops actually reached the troops they were intended for.

The Headquarters section of an artillery unit disembarks from one of the first gliders to touch down at Arnhem. The jeep is equipped with rolls of telephone wire mounted to the front bumper for laying down communications land lines.

Despite all of these problems, the men of the 1st Airborne had written a bloody, but heroic, chapter in British airborne history, holding for more than three times as long as they had been expected to, inflicting heavy German casualties, and knocking out at least sixty German tanks. Even the SS troops, not known for their humanity towards prisoners, treated the Arnhem captives well, out of respect for their heroic performance. Although the 1st Airborne had failed to take their objective, their stand had enabled XXX Corps to drive to the banks of the Neder Rijn, increasing the pressure against the German homeland. The strong German reserves which were committed against the airborne landings, took such heavy casualties that they were unavailable a few months later when the Germans needed them for the Ardennes Offensive.

On 19 September gunners of the 1st Airborne Division landed at Arnhem and quickly moved toward the fighting. The weapon is a 6-pounder anti-tank gun, the largest anti-tank gun available to the Airborne Forces.

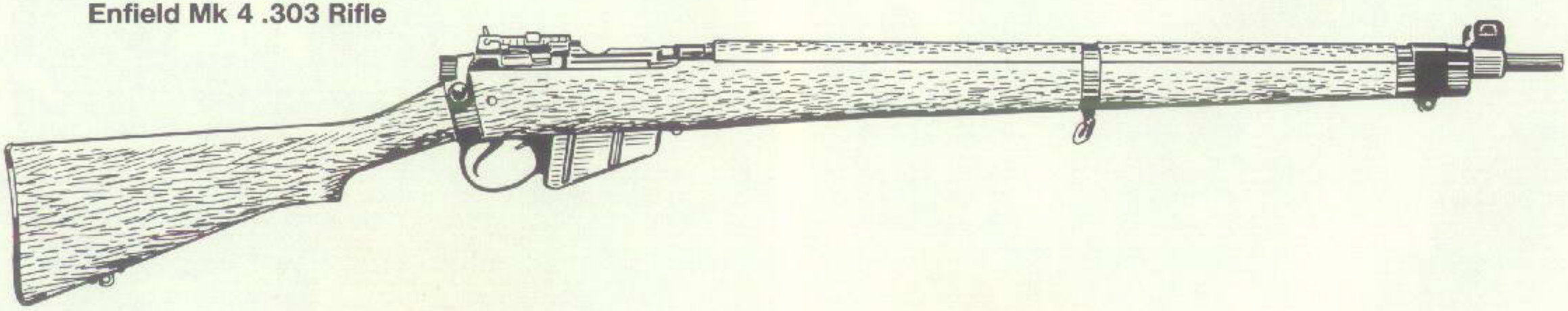
Glider-borne troops prepare to move out toward their objectives after landing near Arnhem. They are armed with Enfield Mk 4 .303 rifles, and 9mm Sten Mk V submachine guns.

Armed with pistols and Sten guns, paratroops move through the ruins of Oosterbeek during the fighting around Arnhem. Although most of the men are wearing their steel helmets, the second man from the right wears only his beret.

Two members of the Glider Pilot Regiment search a Dutch school for German snipers during the fighting around Arnhem. The object on the ground in the doorway is an abandoned equipment container.

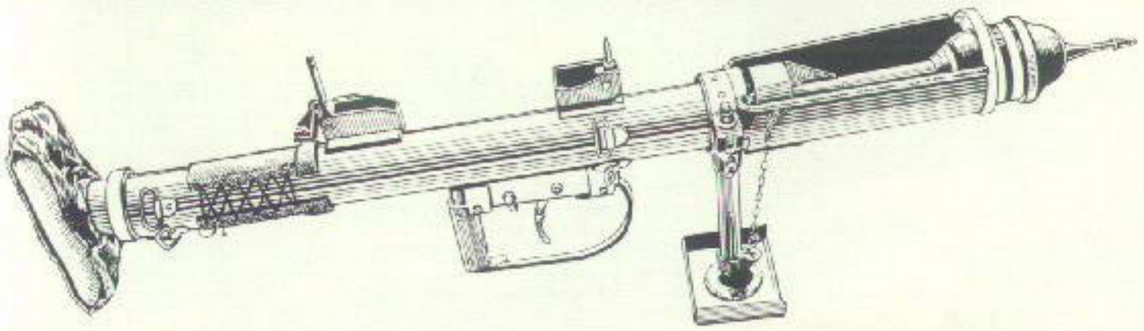
Airborne troops prepare to open one of the resupply baskets which managed to fall within their lines. Less than ten percent of the supplies dropped at Arnhem actually ended up in British hands, the remainder were captured by the Germans.

Enfield Mk 4 .303 Rifle



A PIAT operator and his assistant take up a position to cover a Bren machine gunner along one of the roads leading into Arnhem. The PIAT was extremely valuable as a light anti-tank weapon.

Projector, Infantry Anti-tank (PIAT)



Two paratroops of the 1st Airborne Division are dug in on the defensive perimeter around their brigade Headquarters at Arnhem on 18 September 1944. The man on the left is a communicator and is wearing a radio headset.

These four British airborne troops were captured at Arnhem but managed to escape and rejoin their unit on the other side of the river at Nijmegan, Holland.

1st Polish Airborne Brigade

During February of 1941, an initial contingent of twenty Polish officers attended the parachute course at Ringway. After they returned and related their experience to their commanding officer, COL Stainislaw Sosabowski, he decided to press for the formation of a Polish Parachute Brigade. Polish instructors were trained at Ringway, and a training center was established at Largo House.

As the brigade began to take shape, the mission in most of the members' thoughts was a drop into Poland to help liberate their homeland. As an important symbolic gesture, arrangements were made with the underground to have the brigade colors made in Warsaw, although it was not possible to smuggle them out until 1944. Although composed primarily of Poles who had fled the Germans, a few brigade members were Americans or Canadians of Polish descent.

At the end of 1943, Sosabowski, now a Major General, visited the United States and Canada where he gained insight into American airborne training techniques. After returning to Great Britain, Sosabowski found his brigade to be the focus of political maneuverings between the Polish Government in Exile and the British airborne command to determine who should control the Polish airborne troops. As a result, the 1st Polish Airborne Brigade missed the Normandy jump. Additionally the frustrated men bitterly watched the opportunity they had been hoping for pass by, when they were not dropped into Warsaw in support of the Polish uprising. The brigade was alerted for various operations after D-Day, but in each case the operation was cancelled. The brigade finally received their baptism of fire during Operation MARKET GARDEN, during which they suffered almost 400 casualties. After returning to Great Britain after Arnham, the brigade stood down and did not see action again during the war.

MGEN Stainislaw Sosabowski, commander of the 1st Polish Parachute Brigade, confers with British and Polish officers before the brigade deployed for the jump at Arnhem.

Operations In Greece

After being pulled out of Southern France, the 2nd Independent Parachute Brigade was assigned the airborne portion of Operation MANNA in Greece (it is believed that the code name was chosen because part of the mission would be to distribute food). The operation was planed to rapidly occupy Athens in the wake of the German pullout and prevent a civil war between the Communists and the Royalists. Launched on 12 October 1944, the 4th Parachute Battalion of the 2nd Independent Parachute Brigade was given the objective of securing the Megara Airfield. The battalion successfully captured the airfield despite a substantial number of injuries due to high winds. Over the next few days, the remainder of the brigade arrived and, along with the 23rd Armored Brigade, took over the thankless job of policing the city.

On 17 October, the 4th Parachute Battalion was detached and sent to pursue the retreating German forces. The 5th Parachute Battalion was sent ahead by ship, along with #9 Commando, to Salonika and then to Macedonia and Thrace.

The British forces in Greece were unable to prevent fighting between the rival factions, and the paratroops found themselves in combat with the E.L.A.S. (Communist guerrillas). Over the next three months, the paratroops tried to keep order and prevent Greece from becoming another Communist satellite.

The 2nd Independent Parachute Brigade remained in Greece until they were relieved and pulled back to Italy in February of 1945. In Italy, they acted as a reserve force for the British 8th Army until the end of the war. After the war they joined the 6th Airborne Division for peacekeeping duty in Palestine.

Airborne gunners engage German targets with a 75MM pack howitzer. The 75MM pack howitzer was the largest artillery piece used by airborne units.

The Ardennes

Although the German Ardennes offensive (Battle of the Bulge) is best remembered for the stand of the U.S. 101st Airborne Division at Bastogne, the British 6th Airborne Division also contributed to halting the German advance. Just before Christmas 1944, the 6th Airborne, which had been in training for the upcoming Rhine crossing, was ordered to southern Belgium in response to the German offensive. Transported by sea, the airborne troops moved into defensive positions covering the Meuse river crossings between Dinent and Namur on 26 December. Just before New Year's Day, the paratroops of the 6th Airborne went on the offensive and for the next three weeks they pursued the retreating German forces.

The Division was pulled back to Holland during late January of 1945, where they continued to carry out aggressive patrols across the Mass River. During the third week of February, the division returned to England to prepare for the final major airborne operation of the war, the Rhine crossing.

The Rhine Crossing

On 21 February 1945, the 6th Airborne Division returned to England from Belgium to prepare for their next airborne operation — the crossing of the Rhine River and the drive into the heart of Germany. Although General Lewis Brereton, U.S. Army commander of the 1st Allied Airborne Army, had suggested a number of plans, including one to drop six airborne divisions along with four air-landed infantry divisions behind the Rhine defenses, the plan which was eventually approved in October of 1944 was somewhat scaled back. The plan called for the British 6th Airborne and the U.S. 17th Airborne to jump in support of an Allied ground offensive aimed at securing bridgeheads over the Rhine by British, American, and Canadian ground troops. As part of its intensive training for this operation, the 6th Airborne carried out a corps-sized exercise along with the 17th Airborne, on 16 March 1945. The exercise, codename *Exercise Token* was a success and the 6th Airborne, under MGEN E. Bols, was declared ready for action.

A little over a week after completing this exercise, on 24 March 1945, the Allied airborne forces took off for Germany. Having learned from the disaster at Arnhem, the plan called for the airborne troops to land just across the Rhine within range of friendly artillery support from the 21st Army Group and under an umbrella of friendly air support. Additionally, unlike previous airborne operations in which the parachute and glider troops had gone in first, during Operation VARSITY they would not be committed until hours after the Rhine crossings by ground troops had begun.

C-47 Skytrain transports of the U.S. Army Air Force fill the sky with parachutes of the 1st Allied Airborne Army during Operation VARSITY, the Rhine River crossing. The operation was very costly in transport aircraft and gliders, with forty-four transports and eighty gliders being lost to anti-aircraft fire.

MGEN E.L. Bols, Commander of the 6th Airborne Division, drives his jeep during an inspection tour of British forces engaged in Operation VARSITY. The jeep is marked with a two star plaque and an Airborne forces pennant.

The painful lessons from the Arnhem operation had been especially studied by BRIG Chatterton of the Glider Pilot Regiment. Chatterton, along with his staff, worked out new tactics aimed at delivering the men of the 6th Air-Landing Brigade as close to their objectives as possible. Unlike previous airborne operations, both divisions would be delivered in one massive airlift, which would be followed up quickly by a large scale supply drop.

There was little doubt that the Allied ground forces would be able to force their crossings of the Rhine; however, the airborne forces were needed to seize and hold critical objectives along the route of advance from the bridgeheads. The 6th Airborne's objectives would be the bridges across the River Issel and the high ground overlooking the road leading out of the bridgehead. This high ground, on the northern flank of the line of advance, was assigned to the 3rd and 5th Parachute Brigades. The 6th Air-Landing Brigade, using the new Horsa Mark II gliders, was to seize and hold the bridges over the Issel. Artillery and other specialized troops would land in the center of the area so that they could support either force as needed.

At approximately 1000 on the morning of 24 March, after Allied fighters and bombers had flown numerous sorties to suppress the German flak, the airborne landings began. Successful glider landings right next to the bridges allowed the troopers of the Royal Ulster Rifles and the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry to quickly capture their objectives and by 1100 the bridges and the village of Hamminkeln were secured.

The landing of the 6th Air-Landing Brigade was assisted by the chance off-course drop of a number of American 513th Parachute Infantry troops. These troops had already attacked the German defenders when the glider troops came in. Even with this assistance, the Glider Pilot Regiment suffered some twenty to thirty percent casualties during the landings.

Led by the 8th Parachute Battalion, the 3rd Airborne Brigade had seized Schnappenberg Ridge by 1345 and successfully linked up with advancing ground troops later that afternoon. The 5th Parachute Brigade took until 1530 to secure their objectives and make contact with the 6th Air-Landing Brigade. By late afternoon, however, all assigned divisional objectives were in 6th Airborne hands. As it turned out, the Germans had been caught completely by surprise by the airborne operation since the ground attack had gone in first; however, once this initial surprise had worn off, German opposition quickly stiffened. The 6th Airborne's objectives had been defended by German paratroops who inflicted over 1,000 casualties on the British Airborne forces.

On 26 March, using whatever transport they could find, the men of the 6th Airborne helped lead the advance of Allied forces into Germany. By 2 May 1945, the Division had pushed some 350 miles to the Baltic coast, seizing important towns and river crossings, such as the Ems crossing taken by the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion on 30 March. Wanting to have the honor of linking up with the Russians, 6th Airborne troops turned their berets inside out so that the black lining made them appear to be armored troops. Linking up with the Royal Scots Greys, the paratroops rode the Gray's tanks across the Elbe on 1 May 1945 to link up with the Russians at Wismer.

As the war came to an end, the 1st Airborne, partially rebuilt after Arnhem to a strength of about 6,000 men, was airlifted to Norway. This airlift took place between 9 and 13 May 1945 and was intended to restore law and order and to prevent German sabotage of Norwegian facilities. Other assignments included, holding of key airfields, hunting wanted Nazi war criminals, and guarding German prisoners.

Two of the airborne troops of the 6th Airborne Division who took part in Operation VARSITY in March of 1945, read the city sign on the outskirts of Hamminkeln, Germany. The trooper at the left is armed with an FN/Browning 9MM Hi Power automatic pistol.

Members of the 6th Airborne Division move past a road block near Brelingen, Germany during April of 1945. These troops are still using the bicycles and hand trailer that were dropped with them during Operation VARSITY.

The Post-War British Airborne

After VE-Day, the 5th Parachute Brigade was deployed to Malaya where it was to join troops of the 2nd Indian Airborne Division for operations against the Japanese. The brigade arrived in India on 7 August 1945, only a few days before the Japanese surrender ended the war in the Pacific.

In early September, the brigade was involved in a relief operation in Northern Malaya and then spent three months in Singapore restoring order to the former British colony after the Japanese surrender had left an administrative vacuum. Following this assignment, the brigade took part in Operation POUNCE on Java in December of 1945. The operation was designed to disarm the surrendering Japanese and restore order to the islands while awaiting the return of Dutch troops to relieve them. The Indonesian nationalists seized this opportunity to begin a guerrilla war to gain their independence and the brigade became involved in combat against the nationalists until Dutch troops relieved them in April of 1946. After leaving Java, the brigade deployed to Palestine where it joined the 6th Airborne Division.

In November of 1945, 1st Airborne Division, their exploits at Arnhem already a legend, was disbanded. In September of 1945, the 6th Airborne Division arrived in Egypt for deployment to Palestine for internal security duties. In Palestine, they saw bitter combat against the Jewish underground, which was fighting to establish an independent state. This was somewhat ironic, since a few months earlier the 6th Airborne had been involved with liberating a number of concentration camps in Germany.

Besides Palestine, the division saw service in Iraq, Transjordan, and the Sudan during its stay in the Middle East. Elements of the 6th Airborne remained in the Middle East until 1948 when it returned to England and was disbanded.

With the disbandment of the 6th Airborne Division, only one parachute brigade remained in the British Army to maintain the airborne tradition. The 16th Independent Parachute Brigade consisted of the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Parachute Battalions and was formed in April of 1948 for service in the occupation forces assigned to Germany. Later the brigade was reduced in size to a regiment, which today, as the Parachute Regiment of the British Army, carries on the proud British airborne tradition, earning new battle honors in the Suez operation of 1956 and in the Falkland Islands War.

A team leader checks the equipment of a anti-tank gunner of the Parachute Regiment before embarking on training operations during the 1970's.

A glider infantry sniper of the 2nd Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry of the 6th Air Landing Brigade prepares to pick off Germans during the unit's seizure of the bridges over the Issel during Operation VARSITY. His weapon is the Rifle #4 Mark I(T) and he makes effective use of the camouflage veil/scarf to blend in with his surroundings.

These paratroops from the 8th Parachute Battalion, among the first on the ground during Operattion VARSITY, the jump across the Rhine, engage the enemy at close range with their 2 inch Light Mortar firing high explosive rounds.

This lieutenant at Normandy carries both his Webley revolver and a Mk 5 Sten with wooden stock and foregrip. In addition to his camouflaged airborne helmet (with webbed chin strap) and Denison smock, he has a camouflage veil/scarf tucked around his neck.

A paratrooper rides a light weight motorcycle used to give the airborne forces mobility. These motorcycles were used by dispatch riders and reconnaissance troops.

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